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The deep heart

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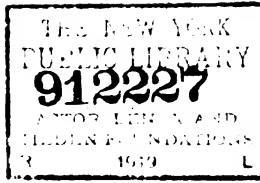
THE DEEP HEART

BY
ISABEL C. CLARKE



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THE DEEP HEART

CHAPTER I

WHEN Justin Mellor's great-uncle died, nearly a decade later than his sanguine hopes had pictured, he lost no time in beginning to carry out the plans deliberately formed during those arduous years of probation. Indeed, there was nothing to prevent him from using his substantial fortune in the way that seemed good to himself. It had come to him — late, it is true — but happily free from all those tiresome conditions with which testators so often harass and cripple their heirs, especially when the said heirs are not very nearly related. Yet, if obstacles had existed, it is certain that Justin would have discovered some clever means of evading them or of outflanking them. He had that kind of strategic mind.

"Thank goodness, I'm not too late. The Villa Annunziata is still in the market. What luck! The owner's been dead for at least eighteen months, and the agent says the daughter can't afford to live in it."

He made this speech to his friend Peter Clutton, the author, in the shabby rooms he was still content to occupy at the top of a tall house in Half Moon Street.

Justin had telephoned to Peter during the luncheon hour, begging him to come that evening. The message had run thus: "The will's all right — no sign of any other. Come to-night at nine."

So Peter had come, not without some reluctance, for he had reached a critical point in his new book, and his sister, an invalid many years older than himself, had not seemed quite so well that day. Still he felt that to refuse would betray a lack of sympathy in his friend's good fortune. He was sitting near the fire, for the March evening was chilly. Outside it was raining with that fine, soft, persistent rain which makes the wood pavements of the London streets as slippery as if it were covering them with a thin surface of slime. Although Peter lived in a small flat in Kensington just off the High Street, he had walked every inch of the way to his friend's abode.

He was a tall, thin, dark man of thirty, being just a couple of years older than Justin. He had well-cut features and dark brown eyes. His clothes were lamentably shabby in Justin's opinion, a fact to which Peter appeared to be incurably blind.

He now lifted his eyebrows interrogatively.

"Villa Annunziata?" he inquired. For although he was, perhaps, Justin's most intimate friend, he had never heard him mention such a place before.

"That place I saw five years ago near Naples," said Justin. "I made up my mind then to buy it as soon as I could."

He lit a cigarette and pushed the box — a malachite one with silver corners — toward Peter. Five years ago? Clutton cast his mind back. It was the date of Justin's first journey abroad a few months after he had gone down from Oxford for good. A great deal of water of varying hues had passed under the bridge since then. Peter had come to the rescue more than once with sharp advice, which Justin had fiercely resented, yet had ended by following. The thought of jeopardizing that future fortune of his had always in the end brought him to reason.

His great-uncle, Mr. Anderson Mellor, had been a man of rigid and old-fashioned views, and he had always said that if Justin turned out to be a steady, hard-working young fellow, and a credit to his family (he meant to himself), he should inherit his wealth, amassed in what is known to the market as "rubber." He was one of the first, indeed, to foresee that there was a future for this resilient commodity. As a tea-planter in Ceylon, and afterward in the Straits Settlements, he had observed how favorable were those fortunate islands toward the growth and welfare of the india-rubber tree. So he had cleared and sown and planted and watched and finally reaped an abundant harvest. He knew when to tap and when not to tap, and he had often wearied and bored Justin almost to death by telling him so. Now, at the age of sixty-five, he had died, a childless widower. Justin had always believed that fifty-five would "see him out," as he expressed it, for he knew that the elder Mr. Mellor's constitution had been greatly tried by those climates which, however favorable to the growth of rubber and cocoanuts, are much less so to the white man.

Mr. Mellor had died rather suddenly after a very few days' illness, and it was scarcely more than a fortnight since Justin had journeyed down to Surrey to be present at what the local paper had termed his "obsequies."

There was property, of course, an absurd great modern house situated at the foot of the North Downs, in one of those spots much favored by city men on account of their easy access to town, yet sufficiently distant to escape the stigma of being suburban. It was like an immense villa, red brick, and standing near a small pine wood. It had been furnished by a large firm to whom Mr. Anderson Mellor had given *carte blanche* with the solitary

proviso that he expected to have chairs he could sit in, beds one could sleep in, and tables that stood solidly on four legs. The gentlemanly young man who had undertaken the order had listened with respectful sympathy while Mr. Mellor enunciated these singular views, and he had carried them out to the letter. Justin could see himself sitting in the smoking-room, leaning back in one of the huge arm-chairs, "smothered in upholstery," as he used to think, and listening while his uncle held forth in uninterrupted soliloquy.

"If every man out there had known when to tap and when not to tap, as I did, many would have made fortunes much larger than mine!"

"I shall get rid of Mount Pine," said Justin. "I want to sell it, just as it stands with all its horrible saddle-bag chairs!"

Clutton was not paying much attention to him. His thoughts were curiously concentrated upon the Justin Mellor of five years ago, and he was compelled to acknowledge that the change in his friend was a very great one; he might even have been justified in calling it alarming. He had sincerely liked that other Justin; had believed in the possibilities latent in that character, with its touch of brilliancy and genius which so easily lifts a man out of the common ruck and sets him above his fellows; and he had certainly never, never pitied him. Brave, hard-up, full of a cheery courage and with a charmingly fresh and simple outlook, he had made many friends, and Peter was the closest and most intimate of them all. Clutton could remember the frank look in the blue eyes, the charm of the gay smile, the flaunting mop of red hair that was then cropped as close as possible to conceal the fact that it curled. Now brushed off the forehead in "nut" fashion, its crinkly wave was undisguised,

and it gave that touch of effeminacy to Justin's appearance which Peter so cordially disliked. Women admired it thus, as Justin knew, so he could not see why he should go shorn to please his fellow-men. He had been called "Ginger" in those old days; no one ever called him "Ginger" now. The Justin of to-day? A sophisticated, cynical man who had lost that old simplicity and frankness, a white-faced man, slow to smile, with piercing, appraising eyes whose blue was a shade too pale.

Clutton was stung by a sudden sense of disloyalty. He ought to have been rejoicing in his friend's good fortune. To inherit a solid five thousand a year at the age of twenty-eight is surely a very desirable thing, calling for congratulations. And Justin would spend his income as he did everything now, prudently, carefully, deliberately, with eyes fixed earnestly upon that single goal — his own happiness and comfort. There would be no more of that city life which had been so bad for him. His tastes, he always affirmed, had been stultified on his income of three hundred a year. Only one-third of that sum had represented unearned increment and was an allowance from Anderson Mellor. That gentleman had been impervious to all Justin's dexterous hints that the sum was inadequate and should be increased.

Now, as if by the sudden touch of a magic wand, all was changed. His barns would be well stored. As Clutton made this reflection he started and flushed and looked at Justin and then turned his head abruptly away. But Mellor had seen the look and had comprehended it perfectly. He had the gimlet mind so swift to probe.

"For to-morrow we die! I know what you are thinking, Peter!"

He looked closely at Clutton. Their careers had

been very different. Peter belonged to an old and impoverished Catholic family; his parents had died when he was a boy, leaving him with very little to live upon and a sister ten years older than himself to support. For the last fifteen years Monica had been on her back suffering from a slowly developing disease of the spine. And now what an existence his was! In that tiny, stuffy flat in Kensington, shadowed by the perpetual presence of sickness and suffering, Peter wrote his novels, thereby earning a miserably insufficient income. Three nights in each week he journeyed down to Whitechapel, where he taught street urchins to box at a boys' club. The fatigue — the folly of it!

To-night Mellor felt a kind of contemptuous pity for Peter, not because he possessed so little, but because he showed a brave and contented face to the world. And he *was* contented. If he needed money it was only because he wished to give Monica some additional comfort to alleviate the tedium of her lot.

The possession of wealth seemed to Mellor just then the most desirable thing on the material plane, and he had small cognizance of any other, so it was only natural that Peter's poverty should make a fresh and disagreeable impression upon him. He said not without an effort:

"You must see the Villa Annunziata, too, one of these days, old man. You'll fall in love with it just as I did."

"Yes. But do you mean to expatriate yourself altogether?" said Peter, who had strong views on the duty of a citizen. "What will you do in Italy?"

"I shall do nothing for quite a year in the most beautiful way you can possibly imagine," replied Justin. "Italy lends itself to that especially in the

summer. I shall *lotus-eat*, my dear Clutton; and if you could only forget those hideous, dirty, degraded little boys for five minutes you would come and do the same!

"They are neither hideous nor degraded," said Peter, his dark eyes gleaming with a whimsical humor. "Their souls are as clean and good as yours and mine, and perhaps much more so. And as for their being dirty, did you ever spend a week in Whitechapel? And did you ever during that week try to keep your hands clean, even with the help of unlimited soap and hot water, which they don't possess?"

"I have only been there once for a couple of hours — I went down with a party to see Petticoat Lane on a Sunday," replied Justin; "I was told it was not really much further east than Aldgate Pump. But I never saw the Pump, though I am sure if it really exists it must be very useful! Otherwise I remember principally the very pungent and lurid smell of the fried-fish shops. Do you eat fried fish when you are there, Peter?"

Clutton laughed in spite of himself. Mellor had a soft, superior way of speaking as if he were perpetually reproaching the rest of the world for being so coarse and loud-voiced and inartistic.

"No," he answered, "and I will confide in you, Justin, that it has made me dislike all kinds of fish — I can not even eat it on Fridays, which is a great bore, as you would know if you were a Catholic! When do you mean to buy this place?"

"Oh, the negotiations have been begun already," said Justin, "and luckily there is a London agent. It used to belong to a Mrs. Waring and she left her daughter very badly off — she won't have much more, in fact, than the sale of the property will bring her."

"I hope you will give a good price, then," said Clutton, extracting a second cigarette from the malachite box and lighting it. "You can well afford to, you know."

"I shall give what I consider to be fair. I am not sentimental, neither am I one to drive a hard bargain. Besides, the place is awfully out of repair, they tell me — no modern improvements at all. By the way, I've had a letter from the girl."

He went to his writing-table and took up an envelope that had a mourning border an inch wide.

"The Italian idea of *lutto*," he observed.

"There are still countries where one mourns for one's dead," said Peter dryly.

But he took the letter from Mellor's hand and pulled out the flimsy sheet it contained.

It was a very short and simple affair, but as he held it it seemed to Clutton, who was extraordinarily sensitive, that he became aware, as if through a subtle process of psychometry, of something of the personality and mentality of the writer. From the first words "Dear Sir" to the signature, "Yours truly, Averil Waring" there were scarcely a dozen lines, and it was written in a hand that was almost childishly unformed, yet during its perusal he seemed to acquire some definite yet obscure knowledge of this bereaved, impoverished being whose home had always been at the Villa Annunziata.

"Mr. Robinson has written to tell me that you wish to buy our villa," the letter ran, "and although I shall be very sorry to sell it he says there is no other course open to me. I have lived here nearly all my life and my mother died here. I should like to feel it is in kind hands and that it will belong to some one who will care for and appreciate it."

For a moment Clutton was silent, then he laid down the letter and said:

"Is she quite young? The handwriting is almost a child's."

"She's about twenty — she isn't of age yet. And at twenty one can stand uprooting. Robinson says she's very much attached to the place." He paused for a moment. "I must have seen her five years ago. I remember there was a little girl running about in the garden — she was small and looked hardly as much as fifteen then. She had long light curls and a white frock." He was trying to visualize that scene which had so fascinated him five years before. "I wanted to go over the villa but they told me Mrs. Waring was an invalid and never received visitors, so I've only seen the outside of it. But the garden was a dream and I knew what the view must be — right over the Bay of Naples with Vesuvius smoking like a great chimney on the right!"

But Peter had lapsed into one of his strange and irritating moods of silent concentration and this enthusiastic speech was lost upon him.

"Poor little girl — poor little girl," he said. The claims of poetic justice would be satisfied, Justin, if you were to fall in love with her and marry her!"

He got up suddenly, said good-night to Justin, and went abruptly away.

"Peter's insular — that's what is the matter with him," said Justin to himself. He was vexed at his friend's abrupt and rather unceremonious departure. "He thinks there's no place like London in the world, especially the East End of it. I daresay he's gone down there now. He has never traveled, and of course he thinks I am mad to buy this villa."

Certainly Clutton had failed in sympathy this evening. Those words of his, "Poor little girl," recurred disagreeably to Justin. Of course it was ridiculous to pity the person whose house you meant

to buy simply because she couldn't afford to live in it, and because she had written an absurd, childish, unnecessary little letter. If he didn't buy it probably some one else would, and perhaps less profitably for the vendor. He wished now that he hadn't shown that letter to Peter; he took such a perverse view of things!

Going to a drawer he took out a photograph of the Villa Annunziata, and sitting down near the light he contemplated it attentively. The small square white tower with its terraced top was uplifted above a mass of trees — a black mass they appeared in the picture and it was difficult to decide exactly what they were. Probably the dense grove of ancient ilex-trees he dimly remembered. Two superb umbrella pines stood beyond the house, making a kind of framework for the view. Vesuvius was clearly drawn, and Naples could be seen lying in the distance. In a few weeks the place would be his and he would go out to take possession of it.

Not that he intended to live altogether in exile. London in June and part of July, then perhaps a couple of months in Scotland with fishing and later on some shooting. But always he should return to the South and the sunshine at the end of October when the cold and dark days began. These plans floated nebulously through his brain. He was a rich man, and he could afford to arrange his life on pleasant lines. The immense freedom of it all! And Anderson Mellor might very well have lived another ten or fifteen years. His own youth then would have gone forever. He had endured the grind of a city office for nearly five years, had been a poor man among rich men, had worked strenuously and lived frugally because any hint of debt or extravagance would have jeopardized that anxiously-awaited fortune. Now that unpleasant chapter had

come to an end, and he could heartily pity Peter chained to London by the twin tyrannies of an invalid sister and an East End Boys' Club.

CHAPTER II

THERE was the sudden tuff-tuff of an approaching motor and the sound broke with an almost violent abruptness across Averil Waring's thoughts. She turned her head and waited with an anxiety that was quite painful, wondering if it would cease when it reached the gates of the villa. Had the Englishman (that was how she had thought of him, possibly because the Italian servants always thus alluded to the new proprietor) arrived a whole day earlier than he had intimated in his letter? Was it to be his crowning offense to rob her of these last beautiful if sad hours, cutting short her silent farewells? The Villa belonged to him; he was master here now, and he could come and go as he chose. It was she who was the trespasser, who had no right to be there in the garden at all. Yet the possibility of his arrival this evening brought the sudden tears to her eyes.

Averil was standing and looking at the sea from the terraced walk that curved to follow the shape of the immense dark-colored *tufa* cliff that ran down perpendicularly to the sands over two hundred feet below. Far-off Naples lay like a pale pearl touched with rose-color, its gleaming houses extending far along the curve of the bay and its terraces climbing the steep hill that was crowned by the ancient Castle of St. Elmo. The breadth of blue between was touched with delicate effects of rose and silver, the water was perfectly calm and held something of the fiery tints of an opal. Would he ever learn to love

that view as she loved it, so that it would tear his heart to leave it?

She strained her ears. Yes, the motor had stopped. She moved rapidly along the paved path-way between the great gnarled trunks of the ilex-trees and opened a little wooden gate that led into the orange orchard. The air was heavy with the sleep-compelling perfume of the blossoms. The great golden balls hung suspended from the boughs; they had always seemed to Averil to imprison something of the glorious Southern sunshine with their splendid effects of color.

As she waited there, hidden behind some rose bushes that were sweet with their burden of dropping fragile pink petals, she saw a man coming slowly with complacent and possessive air down the paved path that led to the terrace overlooking the sea. He was smoking a cigarette, and the aroma reached her across the penetrating perfume of the orange-blossom. He was utterly unsuspecting of her presence, her nearness, and if any one ever beheld the natural and unaffected self of Justin Mellor it is certain that Averil did at that moment. So might a conqueror look entering perhaps upon some splendid city that was the practical and wonderful fruit of victory. And as there is always something cruel about conquest, however humanely achieved, as a triumphing of the strong over the weak, so there was something cruel about Justin then. It was his hour of triumph wherein he saw the actual realization and materialization of dear dreams, the fulfilment of ambitious hopes. He did not even think of the pitiful little letter which should have warned him that in entering the gates of his new possession he must perforce trample upon a delicate girlish heart.

Yes, it was all his, all his, from the high creamy-

white walls fringed with stonecrop and saxifrage and graceful flowering weeds that lifted clusters of rose-pink and mauve and golden blossoms to the blue sky, down to the terraced walk with its white balustrade following the grim contour of the cliff and showing between its low pillars the long blue dancing line of the sea.

In passing them he glanced with renewed complacency at the arches of roses, splendid in their prodigal May blossoming; at the pergolas of vines whose garlands were like gigantic emerald necklaces, at the rows of Madonna lilies, pale sentinels of unimaginable sweetness, at the bushes of syringa covered thickly with starry white flowers. It was a garden of perfume that would have been almost cloying but for the soft brackish air from the sea that mingled its wholesome freshness with those fierce scents.

But how perfect it all was, and he was quick to recognize that on a warm and beautiful evening in May it was at the height of its perfection. Other hands had delved and planted and watered and tended that he, Justin Mellor, might come here and enjoy. It was more beautiful even than his cherished remembrance of it. At that moment he would not even have had Peter Clutton there to witness that triumphant satisfaction of his. Peter might have struck a wrong or at least a jarring note. There was something passionate in his fierce enjoyment of it all. The languorous and heavy perfumes thrilled him. Every nerve responded to the strange atmosphere of the garden. Some day what an enchanting thing it would be to bring hither the beloved woman. Some day that joy should also be his. She had not yet come into his life, but he did not doubt that some day she would so come. She must be beautiful, of course, with a great deal of

charm, highly accomplished and cultivated, not a mere girl, but the fit companion for that serene and ordered life he intended to lead.

It came into his mind then that even if she had no fortune of her own he would like her to be accustomed to riches and luxurious surroundings; she would have delicious ways then of spending money and creating an atmosphere about her of wealth and comfort.

Justin walked slowly as if to miss nothing of the sensations his new possession could offer, and it was some moments before he reached the white balustrade. Seen at close quarters it was badly in need of repair; in some places the paint had peeled off displaying discolored wood beneath. But he was not in a caviling mood; he had been warned that the villa "needed a lot doing to it."

He sat down on a wooden seat and looked toward Naples, and the smoke from his cigarette blew seaward, a thin silver film that seemed to dim for an instant that amazing blue.

Afar like a shadow he could see the rocklike outline of Ischia detaching itself from the background of sea and sky, and the strip of blue that divided it from the headland. Naples was clearly visible in the transparent evening light; her houses and terraces might have been dipped in an ethereal fluid gold, they had so pale and shining a quality. Vesuvius could be seen but dimly, for its summit was wrapped in smoke that was twisted scarflike about it as if some wandering cloud had paused there in its pilgrimage. Shining white towns and villages clung to the curves of the coast-line against a background of splendid mountains.

Below him the sea was clear as a mirror. He could see the dark shapes of the rocks that lay beneath the water upon the pale floor of sand.

Little white sails gleamed here and there, like butterflies poised lightly on the glasslike surface. A boy sat singing in a boat near the shore. Justin could distinguish the dark brown of his bare arms, the blackness of his uncovered hair. He seemed to add an appropriate note of young and vigorous life to the scene.

Above Justin's head the massed ilex-trees offered a dense shade, and in the fading evening light it seemed to him suddenly that there was something mysterious and eerie about them, their twisted stems almost acquired human shape, suggesting hostile attitudes nebulously menacing. He had yet to learn that there is something arrestingly pagan about nature in Italy; the deposed gods die hard in those landscapes of terrifying beauty.

He rose and stepped back, facing the sea with his eyes turned away from the gloom of the trees as if he almost feared to distinguish some obscurely delineated presence awaiting to receive him on the threshold of his new life. As he moved the evening chill touched him. It was like the sudden caress of a very cold hand and it impressed him almost disagreeably, as if he had met with an unexpected rebuff.

He turned away from the spot. By this time his light luggage must have been removed from the motor and carried indoors. He had been aware of a little group of people on the doorstep — men and women with dark Neapolitan faces, who smiled at him as he arrived. He had met their greeting of "*Buona sera, Eccellenza*," with a cool smile and just that little touch of haughty patronage that is so odious to the proud Latin. They were servants, he supposed, who had been in the employment of the late owner. It might be convenient to keep some of them on at least for a time until he was quite set-

tled, for no doubt he would find himself at first utterly at sea about Italian housekeeping. Or perhaps that would be unwise, for the servants of an invalid woman were bound to prove spoiled and lazy. And they had all looked rather old. He had a fancy for young and picturesque servants, clad perhaps in some arresting artistic uniform. There should be nothing banal about his *ménage*. He wanted to have things that were unusual — to strike if possible a new note.

Filled with these thoughts Justin moved back along the path as slowly as he had come, noticing also certain things which had escaped his observation during that first journey. His eye fell now upon the little wooden gate, half off its hinges, and standing slightly open. He stopped, pushed it back with a sudden violence that made the hinges give way altogether, and then paused again, this time to examine the mischief he had done. Of course everything had been allowed to go to rack and ruin — women never knew how to keep up a place properly — it was wonderful the garden should be as beautiful as it was, its very confusion was lovely and brilliant and luxuriant.

Justin entered the orange-grove, and the long grass was soft and cool under his feet. As he moved further into that scented gloom, lit by those golden balls of fruit as if by countless lamps, he came face to face with a girl whose white figure seemed to detach itself with a certain sharp precision from that dusky background. It was a sight that impressed him for the moment quite profoundly, lending human interest to the enchanted place. He would scarcely have been surprised to find a dryad there, or some other of the mysterious denizens familiar to mythology. His mood, too, was intensely and consciously receptive, as if he were lend-

ing his mind to the storing of these new impressions. He was deliberately steeping himself in novel sensations, and the heady scent of the orange-blossoms here in this sheltered and twilight grove almost stupefied him. He stood and stared at Averil Waring, and under that glance, which was astonished rather than scrutinizing and critical, she instinctively lowered her eyes.

She saw in his look nothing friendly nor propitiatory; for her he was simply the conqueror who beholds the first innocent and suffering victim of his victory, and can regard with a tolerant good humor its attitude of mute and futile rebellion and resentment.

But it was not really in the least as a victim that Justin was now contemplating her. He was always slow to perceive suffering in others, perhaps because he was slow to believe in such suffering. He had theories of rising above mental pain, of conquering it by an effort of the will; he had, too, a certain contempt for the mind that allows itself to be darkened by suffering and that yields instead of rebelling. But these thoughts did not occur to him now as he looked at Averil. He did not even just at first connect her with the writer of that letter whom Peter had so tactlessly pitied. It was her beauty that arrested and held him. Until now he had felt that the scene had been incomplete, for had it not led his thoughts to the contemplation of that transcendent day when he should bring hither the beloved woman? Now the human note was dramatically and beautifully supplied. Nothing could have been more artistically perfect than this charming and graceful figure in its wonderful setting. He did not pause to ask himself why she was there, trespassing on his newly acquired property. She was there simply because he had wished to share this

hour with some one who was beautiful and *sympathetic*. There was a silence that lasted definitely for some minutes, and across it Justin could distinguish remotely the crisp and rhythmic lapping of the waves and the first uncertain tentative but thrilling notes of a nightingale.

Then he raised his straw hat and went toward her with outstretched hand.

"Are you Miss Waring?" he asked. He had a singularly soft voice, rather musically modulated; he was aware of it, and as he said the words he deliberately endeavored to exaggerate its natural softness.

"Yes," she said.

She touched the proffered hand for a second; her own was very cold and he felt it tremble a little as if some obscure emotion were swaying her. But he became aware, too, that she had not wished to take his hand.

The pause that followed was full of an awkward constraint, and Justin was conscious of a remote resentment and hostility in her that hurt his pride.

"Oh, I remember — you wrote to me!" he said with a cool carelessness that made her tingle. He smiled down at her with a good-humored cynicism as one might smile at a child's pigmy and futile hostility. The smile struck home. Averil had the feeling of a raw wound sharply and deliberately stabbed. She turned white and her lips trembled. That voice — so soft for a man — could say things that were not soft. She detected that undercurrent of mockery, and felt that she hated him for it.

But pride came quickly to her rescue. At least he should not have the satisfaction of knowing her hurt. She said quietly, in that low and clear voice with its crisp, articulated enunciation which lent it such peculiar charm,

"Yes, I wrote to you. I am afraid it was an unusual thing to do. I must apologize for my presence here to-night." She drew up her head and looked at him steadily. "But you see we didn't expect you until to-morrow. You said to-morrow, or rather Mr. Robinson did. He must have made a mistake. I only came in this evening to—to have a last look."

"Oh, but you mustn't call it a last look," said Justin good-naturedly. "While you are here in the neighborhood I hope you will come whenever you like."

At least she would be a decorative adjunct; he liked to think of her slight, girlish, white-clad figure moving with a certain grace that was almost regal down the pale paths and through these mysteriously gloomy groves of orange and ilex. And it was not likely that she would bore him with a too frequent presence.

Averil shook her head.

"Oh, no, thank you. The place is yours now. I shouldn't dream of coming."

The words slipped out almost against her will with a kind of half-suppressed indignation at the bare suggestion that pierced the armor of his egotism and made him definitely aware that her hostility was at least preconceived, an existent passion swaying her stormily.

"I hope you'll think better of that decision, Miss Waring. I'm not a monster, really, though I suppose you would dislike any one who had bought your home. One has that feeling. It's a profanation—a desecration and all that, I know. But you are young—believe me, you will outlive those emotions—in a year or two you will either laugh at them or be a little ashamed of them."

Again she was conscious of a soft voice uttering

hard and wounding words. All grief cries out to be saved from the healing fate of forgetfulness.

His lazy philosophy, the little touch of patronage, of almost intimate familiarity in his speech stirred her to a hot renewal of that inward anger which made her limbs and, alas, her voice tremble.

"I am not going to stay long in Aspoli," she announced, her small face aflame and her gray eyes shining like frosty stars. (There *was* a frosty look about her — even about the pale hair that with its thick, crisped quality glinted like something frosty seen across a golden haze.) He could never remember seeing hair and eyes that had just that quality before, and it struck him that it was quite a delicious thing. It was the frosty effect of that pale-colored hair and of the ice-gray eyes under their long lashes that made her so wonderfully beautiful, Justin now assured himself. "My guardian, Mr. Robinson, wishes me to go and live in Florence for a time. He thinks it will be easier for me to find some kind of work there. He has found quite a cheap *pension* for me. I am to go there almost at once, so you see I should not be able to come here in any case."

He felt that this speech was somehow intended to remove the sting from that first resolute refusal of his invitation.

"You are going to live in Florence alone?" he asked, suddenly realizing the measure of her loneliness at an age when most girls are being guarded and sheltered by both their parents.

"Of course I shall be alone."

"Not even with a *dame de compagnie*?"

"It is much more likely that I shall be some one else's *dame de compagnie*!"

"Surely there will be no need for that?" said Justin. He remembered now with some dismay the

sum of three thousand francs which he had insisted should be knocked off the purchase price of the villa owing to the ruined condition of the roof and one of the walls, reported upon by the agent he had employed. "When your affairs are settled you will get an income of something like four thousand francs a year from the sale of this place. It's not much, certainly, but with care surely it will keep you quite comfortably and in independence. And living's cheap in Florence I've been told!"

Averil listened inattentively; she did not in the least wish to discuss her private plans with this stranger. She already heartily disliked his red hair and the way he wore it brushed off his forehead; she wondered why he did not have it cut. She disliked, too, those piercing and astute light blue eyes.

She had as yet scarcely any sense of the value of money, what it was worth, how far it would go. So far Mr. Robinson had sent her a cheque from time to time with a few words of fatherly advice saying that she must try to make it go as far as possible. But he had never told her of his own utter astonishment at the — to him — immense lapse of time that would ensue before she would write timidly and inform him that it was nearly all gone. Always, too, she had added that she was very sorry she had not been able to make it last longer, but she was afraid that she was not a very good manager, and Assunta had said that since the war in Libya many things had gone up in price.

Never in her life had she had money to spend. She made her clothes last as long as possible. Assunta washed and ironed and mended them and made them look almost as good as new. Her shoes were mended until there was very little left to mend and then a new pair had most reluctantly to be bought. During her mother's lifetime Averil would

far rather have gone barefoot, like the boys who played on the sands when this happened, for it would mean that for a little while Mrs. Waring would have to forego certain little luxuries that were necessary to her. That was the only reason which had ever disturbed Averil in connection with money, and since her mother's death her economies had only hurt herself and did not worry her at all. She had been very happy in that quiet, tranquil, uneventful life with her mother; she had never fretted against its restrictions, the dullness and seclusion of it—it had never seemed dull to her. As for the delights of shopping, they were unknown to her. She had hardly ever been as far as Naples and then only to buy things that were strictly necessary. Four thousand *lire* a year seemed to her an immense sum. Three hundred and thirty *lire* a month—surely one could never be so extravagant as to spend so much money as that! She and Assunta had never spent anything like that amount. But of course—she was forgetting—they had had no rent to pay. Beyond the bare necessities of living they had spent nothing since the death of Mrs. Waring eighteen months before. Assunta received twenty-five *lire* a month as wages and considered herself well paid.

“There are debts to be paid, though,” she said, remembering some mysterious utterances of Mr. Robinson's on this gloomy subject. “My guardian wishes me to live as cheaply as possible so as to pay them out of my income. He thinks it can be done in two or three years if I live on very little now. I told him I would do my best. I have never wanted things for myself. I was quite happy and contented living here with old Assunta, although it has been so sad for us since *Mamma* died. We had always bread and coffee and macaroni and fruit—we

hardly ever bought any meat. It will be terrible living in a *pension* with other people — with strangers!”

“I think you take an exaggerated view,” said Justin, who felt that he ought to utter a few bracing words. “You are inclined to be tragic about it now but there’s really nothing very terrible about a *pension* in Florence. Many people simply delight in them! Indeed, I have known many persons who found them enormously amusing! But you are young and the young adore tragedies. Afterward we learn how far more true to life a comedy is. I am convinced,” he continued airily, “that the *pension* will prove a charming experience. Florence is a delightful city, as I am sure you know. You will be able to steep yourself in Mr. Ruskin and the *cinquecento*!”

Averil turned abruptly away.

“I am afraid you will never understand,” she said in her childish clear voice, that seemed to ring out now with an accent of impatience rather than of anger. “We seem to be speaking a different language!”

She bowed her head slightly and moved as if to pass him. But the path was narrow and Justin’s figure filled it and he made no attempt to make way for her. So she stepped aside into the long grass and went hurriedly toward the gate. He would have stopped her if he had dared. But there was something in the poise of her head and the proud disdain of her glance as she passed him that completely checked his impulse to detain her.

What an adorably pretty child she was — and what a wilful petulant temper she had!

He watched her as she slipped up the path toward the villa between those low twin avenues of roses and syringa — a frail white figure that reminded

him in its swiftness, its fragility, of some pale, hurrying moth. He heard the great iron gates clang sharply as she went out; the sharp, light precision of her footsteps remained echoing in his ears long after she had gone.

"How she hates me!" he said to himself.

She had told him — Justin Mellor — that he did not understand, that they seemed to be speaking a different language. And he had only tried to show her that there was a lighter side to life — that it couldn't be all tragedy even in a Florentine *pension*!

Nevertheless he felt as if a shadow had fallen upon the beautiful scene, chilling his eager pleasure in it. The conqueror should pass blindfold through the vanquished city lest the sight of his victims evoke an uncomfortable form of pity.

It was clear that her enmity had been bestowed upon him as dispossessor even before she had seen him, and his actual presence had increased rather than diminished her passionate hostility.

"I pity the people who keep that *pension*," he consoled himself by grimly reflecting as he went in leisurely fashion toward the house. "Still, it's a foolish plan of Robinson's. She would have been far better in a cottage with old what's her name — Assunta — here in a place where she is well known."

He would have liked to have further opportunities of destroying or at least diminishing that disagreeable impression he had produced upon her. He was certain that in time he could have succeeded.

Still she was very young to be alone like that, and far too pretty. He feared those conditions of rather sordid independence might hurt that charm of hers and take away something of the bloom from her delicious beauty. He heaved a sigh as he went indoors.

CHAPTER III

THE Villa owed its name to the fact that on one of the walls of the house, facing the road, there existed an ancient fresco of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, peeling and faded now almost into obscurity, but still very delicate and tender in its wistful portrayal of the Madonna and the Angel. It was protected almost jealously by a roof that hung over it in penthouse fashion. The figures were visible although not perfectly distinct, and when the early easterly sunshine fell upon them the wings of the Angel revealed their faint but beautiful gold beneath that slanting illumination. No one knew who had painted it nor how long it had been there. Rose-trees, splashed heavily now with crimson and golden blossoms, made wonderful garlands around that ancient shrine. Mrs. Waring had hung an old cast-iron lantern with dull blue glass before it, and the flicker of light was burning there this evening as Averil passed by in her hurried exit. Under ordinary circumstances she would have paused before it and said an *Ave* in a soft whisper, crossing herself when she had finished the little familiar prayer, but now she felt that to do so would break her heart and precipitate that rush of tears which had been threatening all through her interview with Justin Mellor. She went quickly out into the white road beyond, scarcely bestowing a glance in the direction of that beloved shrine. She was safely beyond the domain before she even turned to look seaward. The sun had set, and the violet veils of the southern twilight were slowly descending over the sea and sky. The blueness had faded from the sea, leaving only that pale silver shimmer, delicate as a moth's wing, under the liquid limpid gold of the

sky. Darkness follows swiftly on the heels of sunset in the south, and Averil hurried up the hill toward the cottage she was temporarily inhabiting with old Assunta, for she kept rigidly to all the rules made by her mother, and the one that had always been most strictly enforced was that she must never be out after dark alone.

The swallows were flying and circling above her head, uttering short, sharp cries that sounded nervous and restless; here and there a bat flew past with desperate and purposeless rapidity. She had just begun to climb the hill to reach those olive-clad heights above Aspoli when a voice stopped her.

"My dear Averil — where are you off to in such a hurry? I particularly wished to speak to you!"

Averil stopped. She had caught a glimpse of Miss Wilkinson bearing down upon her with her dogs from a side lane, and had tried to slip past, hoping that she would succeed in doing so unobserved in the dusk. Useless attempt! Miss Wilkinson, if she could help it, never permitted her friends and acquaintances to escape the irresistible flow of her conversation.

She was an old maid, singularly true to type, who had inhabited Aspoli for more than twenty years, so Averil had known her practically all her life. She lived there not because she had any love for Italy or any sympathy with the Italians but because it was cheap. Her nickname among the Italians was *La Strega*, and indeed there was something extraordinarily witchlike in her appearance. She was thin and angular and had a long, sharply-hooked nose and nut-cracker chin. Her skin was burnt to a deep, parchment-like brown, and she had small, peering, deep-set eyes and thin wispy hair that always managed to escape from the many restrictions in the shape of pins and combs and nets which she imposed

upon it. She lived alone except for an old Italian servant and a number of little dogs of the breed known as *lupetto*. A boisterous little red one called Lupo was chief favorite and his doings and delinquencies always formed the chief subject of her conversation.

But this evening her curiosity and interest had been powerfully stimulated by the news brought by old Ulisse the postman, that the "Englishman" had arrived earlier than he was expected at the Villa Annunziata. She had seen Averil emerge from the gate and hurry up the hill. It required a certain amount of maneuvering to get down to the high-road and cut off her retreat, and Miss Wilkinson had been slightly delayed by Lupo, who had just discovered an ancient and very tasty bone, which he could not at first be prevailed upon to abandon. Still, with a firm determination and a sharp reminder of the whip to recall Lupo to a sense of duty, the feat had been accomplished, and Averil had been arrested in her flight.

"Have you been to the Villa, Averil? Have you seen Mr. Mellor? I heard he had arrived—Ulisse told me. What is he like?"

Her haste and the torrent of questions combined to make her a little breathless, but she only paused for a second and continued before Averil had time to reply, and while she was still wondering which of the questions she ought to answer first.

"I am so sorry I did not see him come. I thought he was expected to-morrow, and I meant to wait about all the afternoon in the hope of catching a glimpse of him! I do so wonder what he will think of Lupo. Englishmen are generally so fond of dogs, and Lupo has such endearing ways. Yes, Lupo, I am saying such nice things about you, but you really must not pick up dirty old bones. I have

just had to correct him, Averil, and it does hurt the poor darling's feelings so. But it was only just a little teeny-weeny touch of the whip! Did you see him, Averil?"

"Yes," answered Averil in a choked voice.

"And what is he like?"

"I — I don't really know."

"You don't know?" repeated Miss Wilkinson incredulously. "Why, you said you had seen him, so of course you must know what he is like! Surely you spoke to him?"

"Oh, yes, I spoke to him."

"And is he very agreeable and charming?"

"I didn't think so," said Averil hesitatingly.

"Is he dark or fair?" Miss Wilkinson knew that she would have a far better chance of acquiring information if her questions assumed a categorical form.

"He has red hair," answered Averil.

"Red hair?" Her face wore a look of keen disappointment. "I never care for red hair in a man. And if they have it they are almost always hot-tempered and jealous. You don't know much about men yet, Averil, for you have seen nothing of the world; but you can take my word for it that it is so. I have often told your mother that it was positively wrong to shut up a young girl as you were shut up. Still she had her own views on the subject."

Averil flashed out indignantly: "She always did what was right — what was best." There was a break in her voice.

"How dreadfully touchy and sensitive you are, Averil. You need not take offense — I am not blaming anybody. And I want to hear a great deal more about Mr. Mellor. Is he young? I am sure that Signor Marletti told me that he was young!"

"He looked about thirty," said Averil.

"As much as that? And with red hair and not at all good-looking and agreeable? I really feel quite distressed. I had been so hoping for your sake that he would prove a regular Prince Charming!"

"Why for my sake?" asked Averil innocently. It was certain to her own mind that Mr. Mellor did not in the least resemble a Prince Charming.

"Because I had quite made up my mind that you would fall in love with each other at first sight! Then you would marry him and go back to live in your own old home and be happy forever after."

"Things like that only happen in books," said Averil, turning away with a little bitter reflection that made her suddenly imagine how greatly she would dislike returning to her old home under such fantastic circumstances. That soft, cynical voice with its cold and wounding words still echoed in her ears.

"Truth is far stranger than fiction!" cried Miss Wilkinson. "I am sure if I had written down all the strange things I have come across and put them into a novel people would say that they were utterly impossible. But I have watched so many young lovers in my time, and I had quite made up my mind this was what would happen to you. In fact, I told Lupo so. He is so wise and I am sure he approved, for he gave two short barks — that is his way of saying 'yes' you know. He barks once when he means 'no.' I have taught him to do that with biscuits, and he is so intelligent he very quickly grasped my meaning. But if this Mr. Mellor has red hair and is disagreeable I must give up the idea. I am terribly disappointed, Averil. He will not be at all an acquisition to Aspoli, I am afraid. And I have felt lately as if we did want a little waking up. In fact, I said so only yesterday to Mrs. Minchin."

"Oh, I never said that he was disagreeable!" protested Averil, aghast that so uncharitable a judgment should be ascribed to her and well knowing that it would be immediately confided to Mrs. Minchin. "I could not possibly form such a hasty judgment of any one. You asked me if he was charming and agreeable and I said I didn't think so. You must not go by anything I have said, for indeed I only spoke to him for a very few minutes, and of course I felt awkward that he should discover me in the garden at all."

Miss Wilkinson looked at her with penetrating eyes.

"You are a very odd girl, Averil," she said, "you do not seem able to form an opinion of any one. And I really think that you contradict yourself without knowing it. I have gathered, however, that Mr. Mellor did not make at all an agreeable impression upon you, and I have almost taken a dislike to him myself."

"Oh, please don't do that," said Averil earnestly, "you may like him very much when you see him. I quite see — I do think — there might be people who would like him very much. It does not really matter to me whether he is nice or not, for I shall be going to Florence so soon now that I don't suppose I shall even see him again. Good-by, Miss Wilkinson. I must be getting home. Assunta will be wondering what has become of me!"

She made her escape before Miss Wilkinson could make any further attempt to detain her. She could hear Lupo's wild barking as the little procession turned homeward, and Miss Wilkinson's voice raised in shrill remonstrance.

As soon as she had left Miss Wilkinson, Averil's thoughts returned to the contemplation of Justin. Well, it was over, that dreaded interview, and per-

haps after all it had been less terrible than a formally arranged meeting would have proved. She began to picture him now going through all the rooms, looking at the things he had bought, and perhaps wondering if he had not paid too high a price for some of them. He had bought a good deal of the furniture, and many of the antique treasures which it was so easy a few years ago to pick up in Italy for a mere song. Averil had begged very hard to be allowed to keep some of them when Mr. Robinson had made a list and priced them, but he had only shaken his head.

"People must be paid, my dear Miss Averil."

And he had glanced at her over the rim of his spectacles with a wise air that made her feel very small and young.

He had only allowed her to keep what was valueless beyond her personal possessions and the few bits of jewelry that had belonged to Mrs. Waring. There was her own future to think of, he told her. How did she suppose she was going to live during the next few months? She had begged almost with tears to keep a fine old crucifix that had always hung over her mother's bed and had seemed to watch her during the last sad hours of her life. The cross was of ancient and solid ebony, and the suffering figure was delicately and beautifully carved in old ivory. But it seemed that Mr. Mellor had said particularly that he wished to possess it, for Signor Marletti had informed him it was a very fine one of its kind, and he had agreed to pay the high price that was asked for it. Of all her possessions this had been the hardest to part with; she felt its loss poignantly. Three Popes had held it in their hands and blessed it and there was a certificate to prove that it had belonged to the Cardinal Henry, Duke of York, the last of the royal Stuarts whose

tomb was to be seen in St. Peter's at Rome. Averil had knelt before it praying in agony that her mother's life might be spared. It was intimately associated with that frail figure that had yet been the pivot and center of her old life at Villa Annunziata.

She felt as if in taking that from her Justin had almost robbed her. In exchange he had only given her money which she did not want. All the money in the world would not compensate for this one thing. He had taken almost everything that belonged to her—the Villa Annunziata with all its dear memories and associations—in return he had given her money, which, as he had told her, would bring her in nearly four thousand francs a year!

Mr. Robinson had gravely informed her that one could not possibly live in the world without money. She must eat and be clothed and have a decent roof over her head. And it was far better to sell the Villa now than to wait a few years and see the whole place fall into such irreparable decay that no one would be fool enough to buy it! Things were quite bad enough as it was, and had the Villa been in even moderately good repair there is no doubt that Mr. Mellor could have been prevailed upon to pay a far larger sum for it. Mr. Robinson had told her this with an implied reproach in his speech, which Averil resented because she felt that he intended to blame her mother for having suffered things to fall into this deplorable condition. And indeed it had occurred to the excellent man to blame Mrs. Waring for having continued to live for so long in a house which she could not possibly afford to keep up, spending every farthing of her scanty capital so there was absolutely nothing left for her child except just what the sale of it all would bring in.

But then where would he and men of his profession have been if every one displayed wisdom in affairs of money, he used to ask himself sometimes? From first to last his whole work was associated with money — other people's money, debts honorable and dishonorable, disputes about money, and he could not help reflecting upon the folly displayed by most persons in their endeavor to deal with it, and particularly in their incompetence to keep that precious commodity even when it seemed solidly in their possession. Few knew how to obtain it, fewer still how to retain it when they possessed it. That was his experience, and it was the experience of forty years' close and intimate association with persons situated in every kind of financial difficulty. It was a mercy in Mr. Robinson's eyes that this young Mellor should have retained an almost sentimental recollection of the Villa Annunziata, so that on coming into his fortune he should desire only to purchase it as quickly as possible. It was the very place for a rich and idle young man to be rich and idle in. A person very much to be envied! If thoughts such as Miss Wilkinson entertained concerning his young ward and this new proprietor of the Villa glanced casually across his mind, he did not mention them aloud. Still, much less likely things have happened, and though the girl was extraordinarily young, even childish for her twenty years, she was undoubtedly pretty.

Although Justin was unaware of the fact, Mr. Robinson had driven quite a hard bargain with him in the sale of the Villa. It was because he felt so sorry for Averil, her youth, her solitariness, her grief at the separation from her mother — and he wanted to do the best he could for her. He made inquiries where such inquiries can usefully be made, and he ascertained the exact amount by which Justin

had profited through the death of Mr. Anderson Mellor, and he came to the conclusion that the young man could and consequently should pay an adequate sum for the realization of his youthful dreams.

Averil did not know this or she would certainly have felt a kind of shame in meeting Justin Mellor. It would have made him seem generous, and she did not wish to endow him with any agreeable qualities. He had robbed her of her home, and nothing could compensate to her for that. But she would have greatly preferred to think he had paid a low price rather than a high one.

As she went along the road where the quiet evening shadows were rapidly falling, snatches of that conversation came back to her — "You are young and the young adore tragedies . . . Florence is a delightful city . . . You will be able to steep yourself in Mr. Ruskin and the *cinquecento*" — and always they made her tingle anew as if they had been a succession of tiny blows inflicted by diminutive but lacerating whips skilfully wielded. She felt as if her very heart had grown raw in the process.

To him she had been only a little girl weeping with the foolish and facile tears of childhood over a broken doll.

CHAPTER IV

"MISS WARING? I heard you had gone away for good."

A very tall figure was standing in front of Averil at a turn of the road. Not perceiving its approach the girl was a little startled and did not reply for a moment.

"No — I do not expect to go away until next

week, Madame la Princesse." She curtsied, coloring a little as she spoke.

"Princess Nadine," as she was always called in Aspoli, was an Englishwoman by birth, and for many years she had resided there at the Villa Magnolia. Separated from her Russian husband, she lived a retired life. Her villa was said to be a most palatial abode, for she was a rich woman and had spent large sums upon it. Averil had never been inside it though she had often looked at its two white towers and wondered a little about its beautiful and solitary occupant.

Although Averil had known the princess by sight almost ever since she could remember, this was the first time they had ever spoken to each other, and she felt a certain awkwardness and constraint. She was not even sure that by thus speaking to her she were not committing an act that was definitely disloyal to her dead mother, who had always refused to know the princess. But the beautiful face, the soft, musical, speaking voice that held an almost thrilling timbre, above all, the kind words that struck so tenderly across her own solitude, attracted her against her will.

In her youth the princess, who was a daughter of the seventh Earl of Westingham, had been a famous beauty, and she still retained a great deal of that former loveliness. A pretty woman seldom loses the pretty ways that probably contributed so greatly to her charm. Her hair had turned snow-white, but her complexion was clear and pale and flawless; her long-shaped eyes, of a deep grayish-violet, were bright as a child's.

"Don't run away," she said, as Averil made a little movement. "I have been wanting to see you ever since I came back from Paris. You know I was away when your mother died or I should have

come to see you then. I was so sorry for you, and I might perhaps have been of some assistance to you."

She looked down kindly at the girl.

"I have felt for you so much — you have had heavy trials. The loss of your mother and now of your beautiful home which they tell me has been sold to a rich young Englishman. I am sure you must be feeling very sorrowful at having to leave it."

The kind words fell like balm upon Averil's heart. Nevertheless she was little able to bear pity in any form and the tears rushed unrepressed to her eyes — the tears she had been keeping back ever since her interview with Justin in the garden. The strange thing was that though she had a horror of being seen to cry and would not have cried in front of Mr. Mellor or Miss Wilkinson for the world, she felt no shame whatever that the princess should see her tears.

"Yes, it has all been dreadful," she said with a sob.

"I am sorry we have never been friends," continued the princess in her slow, charming way, "but your mother did not wish it. I am sure that to her the reasons for this must have seemed good. But it was a pity, because for quite a number of years we were almost the only two Englishwomen in Aspoli, except poor old Miss Wilkinson, who doesn't count, and I am sure we should have liked each other. Won't — won't you be friends with me, Averil?"

"I should like to — to be friends," stammered Averil, startled and a little confused by the suggestion, "but you know I am to go away to Florence next week and perhaps I shall never come back here. The Villa belongs to Mr. Mellor now — he came

this evening — he is odious — I almost hate him!" Her small face flamed. "I feel he has no right to be there among darling *Mamma's* things — among the flowers she loved so!"

"Yes, I am sure it must hurt to think of it," said the princess quietly. "I wonder if you would come back and dine with me? I will send you home after dinner. I am very much alone — it would be kind of you to come. We must begin to know each other better if we are to be friends. And you shall tell me all about your plans."

She took the girl's ungloved hand in hers and they walked slowly along the road by the sea until they came to the great gates of the Villa Magnolia. Averil felt curiously comforted by this kindly touch. It never entered her head to refuse the invitation. Surely if *Mamma* knew in heaven how dreadfully, *dreadfully* lonely her little girl was she would be grateful to the Princess Nadine for showing her this little kindness. Conscience only gave her the least little prick for the seed of disloyalty that lay behind her action, and she quickly stifled it. She would ask Padre Lorenzo next time she saw him if it had been wrong for her to go. She felt passionately in need this evening of comfort and sympathy.

Mrs. Waring had always refused to know the princess or to enter the villa. She had never given her daughter any reason for her avoidance of their beautiful neighbor, but Averil was always forbidden to speak to her, although she knew nothing of the wild stories that rumor attached to the princess' youth. There was a legend of a young lover shot in a duel; of an elderly, tyrannical, and jealous husband to whom she had been married at the age of sixteen and at whose hands it was alleged that she had suffered harsh and cruel treatment, escaping from him after the tragedy. Mrs. Waring had

retained always a strong prejudice, less common now than it used to be, against women whose marriages had been a failure. She had not even troubled to learn the rights of the case; she knew nothing of the circumstances and of the long expiation. But she had been chiefly guided by her fear of an intimacy springing up between the princess and Averil. She was afraid of that young, clear, innocent mind suffering contamination; she did not wish strange influences to mar the perfect simplicity and purity of Averil, superseding her own careful training. She guarded her daughter very closely with a watchful, almost jealous vigilance. Averil at twenty years old knew nothing of the world, nothing of love. She knew that she must always try to be a good Catholic, scrupulously fulfilling all the duties her religion imposed upon her, praying always to the Sacred Heart of Our Lord to give her strength to do so. She knew, too, that in so far as possible she must continue to act in obedience to her mother's wishes, although she was no longer there to watch and guide her.

But Averil could remember, almost as far back as she could remember anything at all, her wish to know and speak to this beautiful and mysterious woman by whose side she was now walking up the wide, marble-paved path to the house with its twin towers. As a child she had stood and watched, sometimes for hours, at the gate of the Villa Annunziata waiting for the princess to drive past. And once she could remember that the princess had lifted a white hand and waved to her, her lips parted in a smile.

And Averil had waved back with her little brown grubby hand. She had never told *Mamma* of this episode — she was afraid that she might be displeased.

So that while now she entered the Villa Magnolia half-reluctantly, it was also with a kind of eager, excited curiosity to see the interior of that wonderful and mysterious dwelling which had once been the center of her childish dreams.

They passed first into a wide, white hall with a small fountain playing in the center surrounded by groups of palms. The floor of it was of white marble and so were the pillars that supported a domed roof. Then into another and smaller hall with ceiling richly decorated and supported by four pillars of rich porphyry. It was a beautifully furnished apartment with a parquet floor finely patterned; there were rare Oriental rugs and hangings. Averil had not time to notice all the details, though she would have greatly liked to stop in front of a large portrait of the princess in her youth. The pictured eyes seemed to follow her wistfully as she went past. The face was very beautiful and very sad. She no longer looked sad, Averil reflected, but serene and peaceful and very quietly content.

They went into quite a small room beyond whose windows looked out across a wide and pillared loggia to the sea. One could step out of the windows into the loggia and so into the garden. A group of splendid magnolia trees now in flower poured forth their incense on the night air.

"I always sit here," said the princess, "all the other rooms seem so large for only one person — I feel quite lost in them."

Averil sat down near the window; it was open and a faint breeze stole in from the sea. She could not see the sea now; it lay obscured beyond that space of dusky gloom, but the sound of the waves reached her ears in a rhythmic rise and fall that was infinitely soothing to her jarred and overstrained nerves. She had often wondered how she would be

the only other specimen she had ever seen, and he was elderly, fussy and rather irritable in manner, almost more like an old lady than a man.

The princess perceived that if this man had deliberately intended to produce an impression upon Averil he had certainly succeeded; she only wondered why he had not thought it worth while to produce an agreeable and pleasant one. It would surely have been quite easy!

"Did you tell him you were going away?" she asked.

"Yes — he said Florence was delightful — that I could steep myself in Mr. Ruskin and the *cinquecento*!"

She laughed in spite of herself as she repeated this remark, and found to her surprise that it had already lost a little of its sting.

"That's quite true. Every one should see Rome and Florence. It will certainly be an experience for you. I only wish you could have had it under pleasanter circumstances."

They went in to dinner and Averil thought she had never tasted such delicious, delicate food. It was not a long meal, and at the end a great bowl of strawberries covered with whipped cream and with lumps of sugared ice floating in it, was handed round. Then they went back to the *salottino* to drink their coffee. The princess was smoking a cigarette and looking thoughtfully in front of her when she said:

"I wish that you would stay here with me for a little instead of going to Florence."

"With you?"

Averil flushed crimson, and her hands moved nervously; she could hardly believe that she had heard the words aright.

"With you?" she repeated wonderingly.

It flashed through her mind how splendid it would be to remain in Aspoli with her beautiful new friend instead of facing that nightmare — the long journey into the unknown, the prospect of living among strangers — the utter severance from everything that was dear and familiar to her.

"You could stay here for a time and see if you liked it; you would be just like my own daughter. I am quite alone. And if you didn't like it you could always go away."

"It is very, *very* kind of you," said Averil, "but I am afraid it would be impossible. You see, Mr. Robinson arranges everything for me and I have to do just what he says until I come of age next year. It seems strange because I hardly know him — he only stayed four or five days at the Villa to settle up *Mamma's* affairs. But if I made other plans he might be angry."

She spoke very simply.

"Oh, if that's all, I will write to him myself," said the princess with the air of one who was accustomed to having her own way. "And in the meantime I hope you will come as soon as you can and stay till we hear his decision. It will break the wrench a little. Then if he insists upon your going to Florence and you find that you don't like it you will always feel that you can come back here. It's a good thing in this life to have a refuge when things go wrong."

"Will things go wrong?" asked Averil innocently.

"My dear child, I am not a clairvoyant. But you are young and very pretty — I wonder if you know how pretty you are, Averil? — and you are quite alone — and the gods are cruel sometimes!" She came across the room to where the girl was sitting and lifting her face with her hand stooped and

kissed her. It was a touch light and soft as of a moth brushing past. "If you come I will care for you as my own daughter. I had a little girl once. If she had lived she would have been just your age. Some one told me once how old you were and when your birthday was. It was a long time ago, and ever since then from the time you were quite small I have been able to look at you and watch you and say, 'that is just the size Olga would have been now.'"

Her face hardened momentarily, as it always did when she spoke of past days; she turned abruptly away from Averil.

But the words and the little caress had touched the girl's heart. And again the thought came to her that if her mother could return now and learn of her present loneliness and misery she would be glad to know that across the desolation of it all this hand had been spontaneously held out in loving friendship. She looked at her as she moved away, and the princess seemed no less beautiful to her now than she had done all those years ago when passing she had waved her hand to her and smiled.

Before Averil went away that night she said to her:

"Will you give me Mr. Robinson's address? I shall send my letter by the early post."

Averil wrote it out in her round, unformed hand. She felt almost sick with eagerness at the thought of his answer. It seemed unfair that this elderly fussy man whom she scarcely knew should have such complete power to arrange her life according to his own whim.

"I don't want to persuade you to come against your will. But it would make me very happy to have you."

"Oh, but I want to come — I should love to

come. I only don't dare hope too much, lest I should be disappointed." Then she added simply, "And I'm afraid, too, you might find me dull and stupid—I have never been anywhere and I'm so unused to seeing people."

"My dear little girl," said the princess softly. And stooping down she kissed her forehead again with a wonderful tenderness. She was wondering what Olga would have been like at twenty years old.

CHAPTER V

THERE was a clear and bright moon when Averil set forth on her homeward walk escorted by the princess' Italian manservant, who was also her general factotum.

The sky was of a soft deep blue and was bright with stars. Against it the palms and cypress-trees in the avenue were drawn with sharp dark precision. The air was cool, but not cold, and the night-ingales were singing. In the distance the murmur of the sea was audible. The summits of the mountainous ravines above the little town were massed against the sky in tones of deepest purple; they looked like giant protecting walls, watchful and vigilant.

Assunta was sitting up when Averil returned. She had received a message from the Villa Magnolia telling her where her young mistress was spending the evening, and she could not help remembering that it was the first time she had ever waited up beyond her appointed bedtime for Averil's return. Averil had never dined out before in the whole course of her life, and Assunta knew quite well that if Mrs. Waring had been alive the girl would not have been dining at the Villa Magnolia to-night.

The event seemed to mark the definite close of the old epoch and to inaugurate the change that threatened their lives. She could not help feeling a little vexed with Averil for this sudden departure from the old ways. She knew quite well that Mrs. Waring had not wished her daughter to know the princess; indeed, she had never really allowed Averil to have any friends at all. From time to time English and American visitors, chiefly artists and their wives, had taken a fancy to Aspoli and spent a few months there, staying either at the hotel or renting furnished villas for a time. Sometimes they had brought with them letters of introduction to Mrs. Waring from old friends of hers and her husband's. The women would gladly have made friends with Averil, but they had no opportunity of doing so. They never saw her alone, and her mother, too ill to go anywhere herself, also refused invitations for her daughter. It had never occurred to Averil to resent this; she accepted her mother's dictum with no thought of mutiny. She was perfectly happy in that narrow, circumscribed life and never realized that it was dull. The two had loved each other with a passionate devotion; they were absolutely sufficient for each other.

"The young birds leave the nest when the old ones fly away," grumbled old Assunta as she set down the lamp and drew back the latch that opened the garden gate in response to Averil's ring. She crossed herself piously as she thought of the dead woman lying under the roses and cypress-trees in the Campo Santo above the town.

In another moment Averil was running up the little flagged pathway between the straggling pink geraniums.

She threw her arms round the old woman's neck and kissed her.

"Oh, Assunta — I've been dining with the Princess Nadine! How beautiful she is! And she was so kind to me, and she is going to write to Mr. Robinson this very night, and ask him if I may go and stay with her instead of going to that hateful *pension!*"

Her cheeks were flushed and her gray eyes were shining with excitement. Old Assunta stood opposite to her in the tiny room and looked at her with anxious, attentive eyes. It seemed to her that even in these few hours of absence the girl was changed.

"You will never do that, I hope, signorina. It is the last place where your dear *Mamma* would have wished you to stay!"

Her voice was stern and a little reproachful.

Averil's eyes instantly filled with tears.

"*Mamma* never knew her," she said in a choked voice. "And I am going to ask Padre Lorenzo's advice — he will tell me if it is wrong or right to go."

Assunta's words had revived all her old scruples.

"You would never have had dinner there nor even entered the house if the signora had still been alive," said the old woman.

"If *Mamma* had known her she would have loved her too," broke in the girl passionately.

The old woman shook her head.

"There were strange stories, and the Russians are a strange people. They are not like Italians. Here our people are frank and smiling, and if they are angry you know it — they hide nothing. But with the Russians you never get beyond the mystery in their eyes. What lies behind it? *Chi lo sa?*" She shook her head again.

"But the princess isn't a Russian — she is as English as I am," cried Averil eagerly.

"She has lived among the Russians for how many years? She is less English even than you are — and you are not English at all, signorina." She regarded Averil with stern dark eyes. New things were bound to happen, and the girl would have to take care of herself in Florence, but Assunta resented the thought that Princess Nadine should dare to try to interfere with that young life.

"I'm proud to be her friend," said Averil. "She kissed me twice and she made me forget that odious Englishman who arrived at the Villa this evening." Her face fell suddenly at the remembrance. "Which room do you think he will sleep in, Assunta?"

"*Chi lo sa?*" repeated the old woman. "The big room with the terrace overlooking the sea perhaps — the one we never used."

"I hope so," said Averil, looking relieved at the suggestion. "I should hate to think he was sleeping in the one where darling *Mamma* died."

All the excitement had died out of her face, leaving it white and cold looking. But she stooped and kissed Assunta's aged wrinkled brown cheek.

"Some day — who knows? — we'll go and live at the Villa Magnolia. I'll beg her to let you come with me, then we shan't be parted, Assunta. Oh, it will be a thousand times nicer than going away quite alone to live among strangers!"

"Ah, don't think of it, signorina," said the old woman, taking the lamp up from the table and moving slowly toward the staircase. "We are poor people, and we must not wish to go and live in great houses. I shall work hard here, for no one in all Aspoli can make silk stockings as I can. And you — you must ask the blessed Madonna to pray that

you may learn to be happy and contented in Florence."

Averil said nothing, but her face wore a rather hard and determined look as she went up to her little bedroom. It was a relief to be alone to think of the delightful possibility which the evening had disclosed to her so tantalizingly. But there had been something in old Assunta's passionate and reverent loyalty to Mrs. Waring that had both touched and surprised Averil. She wondered if it would be very wicked of her to go and live at the Villa Magnolia. . . .

She opened her window and looked out into the night. A delicious dewy fragrance stole up from the garden, and a little light wind blew softly across the sea and touched her hot brow. The nightingales had ceased singing, and at this distance one did not hear the crisp rise and fall of the waves. The scene was beautiful and flooded with moonlight, disclosing surprising effects of color, especially in the massed purple mountains above, whose summits the stars seemed actually to stoop and whisper their secrets, in the pale, glinting line of the sea and the darker gray of the coast-line as it spread away to the north. The white road gleamed like a silver ribbon wandering among the olive-orchards, and in the garden the tall Madonna lilies were ghostly in their pallor. A man passing down the road flung out a few bars of a modern song in a melodious tenor; there was sadness in the sound.

She closed the wooden shutters, leaving the casements wide open, and was soon undressed and lying in her bed. But she did not sleep at first, nor did she to-night resent her wakefulness. There was something very pleasant in lying there tranquilly reflecting upon the events of the evening. She fell asleep at last wondering what Princess Nadine would

say to Mr. Robinson, and (this was of even greater importance) what he would say to her in reply.

It was not very long before Averil discovered that public opinion, or rather such of it as was vested in Miss Wilkinson and her ally, Mrs. Minchin, was wholly sympathetic with Assunta's point of view. These two ladies came to call upon her a couple of days later, and as she saw them approaching, climbing up the steep, flagged pathway, she had a sudden premonition that their visit boded no good.

To begin with, Mrs. Minchin never climbed hills if she could help it. She was extremely careful of her health and was supposed to be suffering from an obscure and mysterious form of heart disease which forbade all exertion and especially secured her immunity from visiting places or people that were likely to bore her. During nine months of the year she inhabited a fine apartment in the Hotel Vesuvius. She was a widow, and her daughters were both married and very seldom found time to visit her at Aspoli. She found Miss Wilkinson extremely useful, and in return for occasional invitations to luncheon she induced her to perform all kinds of errands for her which she herself would have found it too hot or too cold, according to the season, to execute for herself. Miss Wilkinson was almost run off her willing feet in performing these neighborly actions, and it was a comfort to her to be able to feel that she was at the same time giving Lupo the exercise which was so necessary for his nerves.

Mrs. Minchin had not shown much attention to Averil since her mother's death, and she had even privately informed Miss Wilkinson that she had not encouraged the girl because she was afraid she might become a nuisance; it was better for her to realize as soon as possible that her position was now entirely changed. She was almost penniless, and had

no home of her own nor apparently any relations who would be saddled with her; she could not, therefore, expect the same kind of attention she had received during her mother's lifetime. Mrs. Minchin had on very rare occasions been permitted to visit Mrs. Waring on days when she was well enough to receive; this was quite as it should be, for, as one of the oldest members of the English colony in Aspoli, Mrs. Waring had had a certain position of her own and people coming to the place had always wished to know her.

Averil was not long left in suspense as to the nature of their errand, for as she came shyly into the room Miss Wilkinson ran up to her crying:

"My dear Averil; we heard such an unpleasant piece of gossip about you this morning. I am convinced it can not be true, as I told Lupo ——"

"Don't be so ridiculous, Maud!" said Mrs. Minchin irritably. She disliked dogs and her relations with Miss Wilkinson were apt in consequence to be periodically strained almost to breaking-point. "You know as well as I do that it doesn't concern Lupo at all. You should break yourself of that silly habit of pretending he is a human being and able to understand what you say to him."

Lupo, aware by some dog instinct that he was the subject of conversation, sprang delightedly up at Miss Wilkinson and began to bark.

"Hush, darling; you mustn't make that noise." She caught him up in her arms and held him firmly, a little afraid that he might show a tendency to become demonstrative in turn toward Mrs. Minchin.

When Lupo had been silenced and secured, very much against his will, Mrs. Minchin turned to Averil.

"We were told," she said, "that there was some question of your going to live with Princess Nadine

as her paid companion. I have no doubt she would make it well worth your while, but you do owe it to your dead mother not to have any dealings with that woman!"

Mrs. Minchin was a robust-looking woman in spite of her alleged ill health; she was inclined to be hectic and at that moment her large face was colored a lively purple.

"Yes, dear Averil," chimed in Miss Wilkinson, "I am sure the prospect of going there would seem quite delightful to you after *this*!" She glanced round the shabby little room significantly. "But I am quite sure without your telling me that you would never dream of accepting such an offer, for every one in Aspoli knows your dear mother's opinion of the woman. They lived side by side, as it were, for nineteen years and hardly knew each other by sight!"

Averil flushed crimson and then turned white; her mouth trembled. She looked from one to the other without speaking.

"Of course one would not believe such a thing without having it confirmed. But I was told that you had actually decided to go, Averil," said Mrs. Minchin severely.

"Nothing is decided," said Averil, at last, in a low tone, "but it is quite true that the princess has asked me to go and stay with her for a long visit. Not as a paid companion at all — she said if I went I should be just like her own daughter. We are not sure yet if my guardian, Mr. Robinson, will approve; but she has written to him. I am almost sure he will say yes, as he never really liked the idea of my living alone in Florence."

"I shall write to Mr. Robinson, myself," said Mrs. Minchin in a tone of triumph. "I know him quite well — I saw him when he was here — and I

shall explain the whole situation to him. You are very young, Averil, and you can not imagine the harm it does to a young girl to be mixed up with a woman of doubtful reputation!"

Averil listened to these terrible words as if she had been in a dream. Those relentless hands seemed to be bent on destroying the future prospect which had held so much beauty and promise.

"I can not let you do this mad thing without making at least some effort to save you," continued Mrs. Minchin, perceiving that her words were taking effect. "If you want to live with the princess you would share her social position. None of the Westinghams will speak to her. She is completely ostracized. She lives here because they refuse to have her with them in England."

She paused, and Miss Wilkinson took up the theme, expanding the point which she felt must tell with Averil in the long run.

"My dear, it is inexplicable to me that you can even contemplate such an idea for a moment! Have you *utterly* forgotten your mother? Don't you respect her wishes *at all*? Don't you feel as if by merely knowing the princess you were dishonoring her memory?" She uttered these questions in a mournful and tragic voice, clasping Lupo tightly in her arms, and looking extraordinarily witchlike.

Averil bit her lip to keep back the tears; she was not yet able to speak of her mother without crying. These people seemed to be forcing a rough intrusion into her sanctuaries, making common the things that were sacred and precious. There was no past intimacy that could possibly justify them in their present course.

"I dare say you are attracted by the comfort and luxury she can offer," said Mrs. Minchin, who considered that Miss Wilkinson was too sentimental in

her manner of dealing with the case. "But let me tell you these things are snares and can be bought too dearly. It would be far more dignified and self-respecting to do what Mr. Robinson originally proposed, and go and live in Florence on your own small means than to become a dependent in that great house."

Both Mrs. Minchin and Miss Wilkinson had in the beginning made overtures to Princess Nadine. But these overtures had been quietly and courteously repelled and neither of them had ever crossed the threshold of the Villa Magnolia. Afterward they said they had followed Mrs. Waring's example in declining to know the princess.

At last Averil found speech.

"Princess Nadine has been very kind to me," she said with a touch of indignant pride, "and I want to go and live with her. If Mr. Robinson says I may I shall do so, for I am alone now and I have to decide things for myself."

"And you would have no scruple at all about going against your mother's wishes?" inquired Miss Wilkinson sorrowfully.

"None at all," said Averil. She managed to meet their wondering eyes squarely. "I am quite sure if *Mamma* were here now she would understand and approve. Padre Lorenzo says the same thing. He thinks it would be far better for me to stay with her and be sheltered and cared for until I am a little older than to go away and live among strangers. She is not a Catholic, but he does not think that matters, for as long as I am here he can look after me and advise me."

"What can a village priest know of the world?" said Mrs. Minchin scornfully. "And if there is anything in religion at all it does teach one to honor and obey one's parents and not fly in the face of

their wishes the moment their backs are turned or they have the misfortune to die! I am astonished that you should allow yourself to be guided by Padre Lorenzo when your path is so extraordinarily clear."

She rose majestically, and Lupo, imagining that the long-desired moment of departure was at hand, made desperate struggles to free himself and jump down from Miss Wilkinson's arms.

"I am disappointed in you, Averil," said Mrs. Minchin, "you always seemed such a good, devoted daughter. "I am afraid I must make it quite clear to you that you will have to forfeit my friendship if you go to the Magnolia. I really can't be mixed up with Princess Nadine."

"I shall be glad to see you if you come *alone*," said Miss Wilkinson, who secretly hoped that she might sometimes be invited to luncheon. "Lupo would miss you dreadfully if you never came at all. And by and by you may find that you need a friend — these great people are often sadly capricious! You *would* miss her, wouldn't you, Lupo darling? You wouldn't like me to give Averil *quite* up just because she was a naughty girl?" Lupo, who had succeeded in effecting his release, wagged his tail and gave two short barks. "There — that is his way of saying yes — he couldn't bear it if you were never to come. And I would not disappoint my darling boy for all the princesses in the world!"

"I'm afraid our errand hasn't been very successful," said Mrs. Minchin with a contemptuous glance at Lupo. "But, mark my words, Averil, if you do this thing you will be punished for it. People always are when they take the law into their own hands and fly in the face of Providence. And if you are punished, you will know that you thoroughly deserved it. I hope you will think this well over before you take any rash step."

Between her wish to laugh and her fear of crying Averil was by this time feeling almost hysterical. She was thankful when the farewells were at last made, not without some further little admonition from both her visitors, interspersed with impatient barks from Lupo.

But as they walked down the flagged pathway Mrs. Minchin observed:

"That girl has made up her mind to go there, Maud. What a heartless little wretch she must be!"

CHAPTER VI

MR. ROBINSON was extremely perplexed and not a little ruffled when he received a letter from Princess Nadine, whose name was quite unknown to him, asking that Averil Waring might be allowed to go and stay with her for a visit of indefinite duration.

On the face of it, the offer was a very timely one. He had never altogether liked the idea of sending the girl to Florence, where she knew no one and had no friends. During the few days he had most unwillingly spent at the Villa Annunziata he had had opportunities of forming a superficial opinion about Averil, although even this had been a difficult matter. She did not belong to the type of English girl to which he was accustomed, and her life had evidently been so utterly secluded that her knowledge of the world must be practically nil. There was a certain amount of risk in sending such a person alone into the world to grapple single-handed with the difficult problem of life. Any of his own four daughters would have been far more capable of so grappling, even the youngest, who was

not quite sixteen years old and had begun to give him a good deal of trouble in her violent resentment of all discipline.

Of course, it would be far preferable for Averil to go and live with this Princess Nadine if she were really the sort of woman to whom a very young girl could safely be entrusted. But how was he to find out if she fulfilled this single, but most important, condition? She admitted in her letter that she had never known Mrs. Waring, although she had lived in Aspoli almost as long as the dead Englishwoman. Had there been, perhaps some ulterior reason for this singular fact? It was certainly his duty to try to find out all that he could before he gave his consent. The guardianship of Averil had already given him a good deal of trouble and perplexity, and at least two sleepless nights. He had even suggested to his wife that they should invite her to make her home with them for a year or two, but this had been promptly vetoed by the four daughters, who wisely said that as it was they were already too numerous and had to take it in turns to go to parties.

Mr. Robinson laid down the letter that had once more opened up the old difficulty which he had confidently hoped had been settled. He went across the room and took down a large and heavy Peerage. Among foreign titles borne by the members of the English aristocracy he found the following entry:

"**WORONOV**, The Princess Nadine Mary, formerly Lady N. M. Cheverton, second daughter of the seventh Earl of Westingham. Married 18 — Prince Vladimir Woronov. Address Villa Magnolia, Aspoli, near Naples."

Mr. Robinson did not personally know any of the Westinghams, but on glancing down the page devoted to that family, its origin, its members and

its abundant collaterals, he found that one of the latter had married a wealthy client of his own — a man who for years had been in diplomacy and knew Europe by heart. He wrote begging the favor of an interview with Sir Hugh Carless, and on the following morning was shown into his vast study in Berkeley Square.

"Morning, Robinson," said that gentleman, who was chiefly occupied in smoking a cigar, whose aroma reassured Mr. Robinson as to its excellence and added to the pleasure of selecting a similar one for himself, which he was immediately invited to do. "What's your trouble?"

Mr. Robinson gave a dry and rather legal account of his connection with the Waring family, and then proceeded to explain his new difficulty; after some succinct and preliminary remarks, he ended by producing Princess Nadine's letter, which he handed over to Sir Hugh.

Sir Hugh read it attentively. He had known the Princess *dans le temps* and remembered her quite well. He had been heard to say that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and he thought the Westinghams had been unduly harsh in their treatment of her.

"I want to know," proceeded Mr. Robinson, in his careful, cautious voice, which seemed to suggest a nervous dread of rendering himself liable to an action for libel, "if she would be a — proper person for this young girl to go and live with. Although Miss Waring is twenty, she is in many ways quite a child. It is her mother's doing, and, if I may say so, her mother's fault."

"It is a very old story, Robinson," said Sir Hugh, "but I'll tell you about it and then you can judge for yourself. After all, I'm not revealing secrets — every one in Petrograd knew it twenty-five years

ago." There was a gleam of amusement in his keen blue eyes. "Let's see — Princess Nadine was the second of Westingham's girls — he was awfully proud of them, and they were splendid, both of them. He was military attaché somewhere when Woronov fell in love with the younger one. She was only just seventeen and I remember Westingham was rather opposed to the idea. But she was an obstinate kind of girl and it seems she'd made up her mind to marry him. Good looking, rather mysterious sort of chap, Woronov; he was at least twenty years older than she was. They say he used to beat her. They didn't have any children for about five years and then a daughter was born. After that no one quite knew what happened, but there were all sorts of stories. Anyhow, the prince got suddenly furiously jealous of a young count, a neighbor of theirs, a very handsome boy. There was a duel and Woronov shot him dead. When he got home after killing his supposed rival he found that the baby had had convulsions and died, and his wife was beside herself with grief. He was very violent and told her what he had done. There was a fearful scene in which he threatened to kill her too. That night she escaped from the house — it was in the depths of the country. She got out dressed as a peasant, I believe, and fled to Italy, where she's lived ever since. Westingham wanted her to go back to her husband, but she refused. He didn't like the scandal, and he would never let her go back to his own house, and her brother, who has now succeeded to the title, carries on the same policy. The prince tried to get her back — in fact, he never stopped trying till he died. He made all kinds of promises, but it was no go. I told you she was obstinate."

"And she is well off?" inquired Mr. Robinson,

who had listened with deep attention to this recital.

"Very well off indeed. The prince didn't leave her much — there wasn't any settlement — the Westinghams aren't rich — but the young count — the one who was shot in the duel — left her everything he had."

Mr. Robinson drew in his breath and closed his lips in a thin firm line.

"He was a mere boy," continued Sir Hugh, "and he owned to being in love with her. I am perfectly convinced myself that Princess Nadine was absolutely innocent. But I admit that every one didn't take that view of the case."

"Was there much money?" inquired the lawyer.

"Oh, yes; it was a large fortune. You see, he had no relations, poor boy."

"And in your own case, Sir Hugh, would you allow your own daughters to stay with her — for a long visit?" pursued Mr. Robinson.

Sir Hugh had two handsome daughters. They were motherless and he had not an atom of control over them. They did as they pleased, dressed as they pleased, went where they pleased, and they never dreamed of consulting him. If he mildly objected to any of these things and ventured to remonstrate they would throw their arms round his neck and kiss him and cry: "Darling Daddy, how *too* weird of you!" It was all very pleasant and agreeable, and he felt that if he had done his duty and been harsh and stern he would never have enjoyed those affectionate interludes. Still, conscience did occasionally prick him, and his eldest sister frequently told him that he was laying up for himself a harvest of trouble. He paused a few minutes before replying, and then said:

"I don't believe it could hurt the girl — any girl. I am sure she's the kindest of women, and then she's

so sympathetic and attractive. I think I'd let her go there if I were you, Robinson. As for my own girls, if they took it into their heads to go and stay with the princess I don't see how I could stop them, and I don't really think I should want to. And, of course, they are placed in rather a different position. But they do what they choose, you know, Robinson, and if there's a way of stopping girls from doing that I haven't found it."

Mr. Robinson looked very grave at this exhibition of parental helplessness and incompetence; he felt that he had done better than that in his own domestic circle. He folded up the letter with such decision that the paper seemed almost to snap.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Sir Hugh, very much indeed. It's so important in a matter of this kind to be in possession of all the facts of the case. You see, I've a very special reason for wishing Miss Waring to remain in Aspoli. A very wealthy young Englishman has just bought the villa that belonged to her mother for many years, and he's gone out there to live in it. I thought perhaps—in time, you know—when they got to know each other better—that he might take a fancy to little Miss Waring. Just an idea, you know, and it may never come to anything; still, it would be a great thing for her if it did. I hope indeed the princess may prove a very valuable friend to Averil—she's so absolutely alone in the world. And as you say, the story's more than twenty years old—I dare say a great many people have forgotten all about it. You said, did you not, that the princess was a very beautiful woman?"

"She was as lovely as ever last time I saw her. That was in naught-three, when I was in Naples. Came across her on the steamer going to Capri. Her hair was perfectly white, but that somehow

added to her loveliness. Yes, yes, she's distinctly attractive, Robinson."

Mr. Robinson had finished his cigar as well as his errand, and now rose to take his departure. As he passed through the hall two girls came swiftly in at the front door, which was being held open for their ingress. He thought they looked like two extremely pretty actresses, for their cheeks were faintly rouged and their hair was brilliantly golden. They were dressed in the height of an exaggerated fashion just then prevailing. A strong whiff of perfume greeted his nostrils as they passed by laughing and talking. They did not appear to notice him, but went helter-skelter toward their father's study.

"Darling Daddy," he heard them cry in chorus, "you never saw such a *chouse!*"

This word caused Mr. Robinson visibly to shudder. He left the house aghast at what he had seen and heard; for the moment all thought of Princess Nadine and of Averil was completely obliterated from his mind. Being a family man of prim and old-fashioned views, he felt that if he had ever encountered either of his own four daughters attired in such fashion, or heard them making use of strange words of argot, he would have given them a sharp taste of parental discipline. It was nonsense for a man to say his girls did "what they choose." It argued an extraordinary laxity on the part of the parent — almost a criminal laxity, if one could use so harsh a word. But half the trouble in the world which did not actually arise from affairs of finance certainly could be attributed to the negligent or injudicious up-bringing of children. With his mind full of these reflections, Mr. Robinson pursued his way homeward, and if he was a trifle more stern and repressive than usual that day at luncheon neither his meek wife nor his four disciplined daughters ever

guessed the reason. What a pity that Carless, a man of brains and real ability, should have abrogated the right to rule over his own household!

His letter to the princess, written after an excellent meal, which had produced within him a sense of great contentment, was a masterpiece of polite and grateful acceptance. The princess laughed a little over the old-fashioned formality of its phrasing, and later she showed it to Averil and they laughed over it together. But it is certain that few letters have ever had a more welcome effect on their recipients than this one had when, in due course, it arrived at Aspoli and was conveyed by old Uliasse to the Villa Magnolia.

Fortunately for Averil, it was already well on its way before Mrs. Minchin's letter of remonstrance had even reached him. This might have caused Mr. Robinson to be seriously disturbed had not the die been already cast and his decision given. Not that he felt it would have influenced him to any great extent. He had a very deep respect for Sir Hugh's opinion and judgment, although he was so slack in his management of his daughters. With full knowledge of the princess and of her unhappy story he had been quite favorably disposed toward the plan. And if things went wrong Mr. Robinson felt that the whole of the blame could not be attributed to him. He could always say, "I asked Sir Hugh Carless's opinion and he wasn't at all against it." In fact, it was somewhat after this fashion, without mentioning any names, that he drafted his reply to Mrs. Minchin.

CHAPTER VII

AVERIL was having tea on the following Sunday afternoon in the garden of the Villa Magnolia when Justin Mellor was announced. He came through the big white marble hall past the fountain that was playing in the center, and out onto the terrace beyond, where he found the princess and Averil Waring.

He had been invited to come and he was looking forward to meeting his neighbor, for he had heard much of her wealth and beauty, her charity to the poor and the secluded life she led. It bored him a little to find Averil there, for he would have greatly preferred to meet the princess alone, and he had not seen anything of Miss Waring since that interview in the garden of the Villa Annunziata on the day of his arrival. He thought she must probably have left Aspoli by this time, not that he particularly desired her absence, for the girl was undoubtedly pretty, although she had such a bad temper. At any other time he would have been glad, perhaps, of an opportunity of trying to correct that first disagreeable impression he felt he had made upon her.

The princess had known many Englishmen and she had been heard to say that she preferred the men of her own nation to those of any other, but she had lived out of England too long to have met one of Mellor's type before. He did not belong to the official or diplomatic type to which she was accustomed nor to the naval and military ones she had known. "The long red hair," as Averil had called it, would have been less conspicuously red if it had been more closely cropped, and its crisp waviness would also have been less noticeable. He had certainly a pleasant soft voice — a shade too soft per-

haps — and she was aware that in speaking to her he chose his words carefully. There was a touch of sententiousness in his speech, and she perfectly understood why he had torn Averil's nervous system to rags on the occasion of their first meeting.

"I am glad to have an English neighbor," said the princess in her charming way that yet had a little touch of ice about it which prevented people from attaching too much importance to her words. "English people don't often settle here; they prefer the big Italian cities where they find a colony of their countrymen. This is a backwater and I wonder why you chose it. Are you an artist, Mr. Mellor?"

"No; I am nothing at all," said Justin, secretly a little mortified. He only wished it had been in his power by some superlative talent to add his name to the long list of famous Englishmen who had settled in Italy. To follow in the footsteps of Byron and Shelley, of Leigh Hunt, Trelawney, and the Brownings would have been a delightful prospect. But self-expression had been denied to him. At that moment he envied Peter.

Averil had been sitting there, silent, after the first greetings were over. She helped the princess with the tea and was already slipping into the rôle of the daughter. It was not a difficult one for her to play, for indeed it was the only one to which she was thoroughly accustomed. She was certainly looking very pretty to-day, Justin reflected, as he glanced at her once or twice. She smiled when the princess spoke to her and did not look at all ill-tempered nor unhappy and tragic. Perhaps she was beginning to accustom herself to the thought of departure. As yet he knew nothing of the altered arrangements which were to keep Averil in Aspoli.

"I chose it because I fell in love with the Villa Annunziata many years ago," he added.

"I hope you won't find it too lonely," said the princess.

"I suppose one is always a little lonely at first in a new place. But at present I find lots to do," he answered. "The house, for instance, takes up a good deal of time. I really hardly know where to begin. Sometimes I think it wants rebuilding."

Averil flushed a little when he said this; she turned her face away and gazed seaward for a moment. Had he already begun to repent of his bargain? Was he disappointed with the materialization of his dreams?

As he spoke, Justin glanced with envy at the white walls of the Villa Magnolia; the house was almost palace-like in its stately magnificence. He could see from where he sat the wide white marble hall with its fountain and its shadowy palms. By contrast his own villa seemed small and insignificant.

"But if you were to rebuild it you would lose all the charm of an old Italian house," said the princess quickly. "It's so easy to build a new place, but you can't create the old atmosphere. That is my one quarrel with this villa — it's so grotesquely new."

She knew that his speech must have hurt Averil; she had seen the changed look that came over the girl's face, and she said these words to soften its effect rather than from any desire to argue or contest the point.

Justin felt that he had made a mistake. The dreadful thought occurred to him that the princess found him *banal* in his views, and the sudden remembrance of Mount Pine, which had contained the last word of Philistine luxury and vulgarity, sent a cold shiver down his back. Was he so unlike Anderson Mellor after all?

"I advise you to live in it for a whole year be-

fore you do anything more to it than is absolutely necessary," continued the princess in her cold, charming voice. "You'll be surprised how little you want to change anything at the end of that time."

Although she spoke quite impersonally, he became aware that she was tacitly ranging herself on Averil's side, and if there had been any ulterior motive of retaliation in his first speech about the house, he felt sure that she had detected it and intended to convey a little reproof that should also console the girl for this gratuitous denigration of her old beloved home. It was almost, too, as if she questioned his taste in this matter of the rebuilding of the villa when she suggested that he should wait before taking drastic action.

"When you've lived in Italy a little longer you'll learn to love the beautiful confusion — even the inconvenience — of old Italian villas. But you must forget English standards first," she said.

"I am sure you are right," said Justin, smiling, but neither the words nor the smile had come quite easily. He wished Averil had not been present, for he felt that he could have enlarged upon the point had she not been there, could have made his hostess realize that the Villa Annunziata really failed to attain to any modern standard of comfort or convenience, whether English or foreign. But with Averil there it was impossible to do this, or to inform the princess, as he was really longing to do, that most undoubtedly Mr. Robinson had demanded the uttermost farthing from him, and that like a fool he had paid it almost without demur.

With these two women who had lived so long in Aspoli he felt almost like an interloper, like a "new man" suddenly dumped down on old acres. And the knowledge that he was a "new man," as far as his wealth was concerned, hurt his pride a little.

Anderson Mellor's money had liberated him from a subordinate position in a city office where the work had been both hard and tedious. Of course, it would take a little time to accustom himself to these novel conditions of having plenty of money to spend, and the delightful ability to gratify every reasonable whim. In the days he had spent at the villa he had, however, been a little surprised to find how irksome the solitude was to him. Proud and pleased with his new possession and with the sense of responsible ownership that it gave him, he had still allowed himself to be irritated by its primitive imperfections, and he had desired to have a sympathetic listener to whom he could convey something of that surprised and injured disappointment he was conscious of feeling. But he had been surrounded only by Italians, whose language was still almost a sealed book to him, and those smiling and attentive, but indolent, servants had tried to soothe his outbursts of irritability as if he had been a petulant child. It was indeed, as he was to discover later, their normal attitude toward children, this seeking to allay and soothe exhibitions of ruffled temper. But his lack of mastery of their speech caused him to comprehend but imperfectly what they said, although he guessed that they wished to calm and propitiate him. And the evenings, spent in complete solitude, how long and dull they had been! He had found himself desiring above all things the ordered comfort of his London club with its array of morning and evening and illustrated papers, its monthly journals and magazines, its large, luxurious arm-chairs and attentive waiters. He had never lived in the country and he had never before been so much alone, and his mood had terminated in the writing of an imploring letter to Clutton urging him to come out and stay with him for at least a month. He had

an immeasurable longing for Clutton's society; even if they quarreled all the time it would be better than this lonely and silent peace.

"When are you going to Florence, Miss Waring?" he asked presently.

Before she had time to answer the princess stretched out her hand and touched Averil's.

"I'm going to keep this little girl with me, Mr. Mellor. I can't let her go to Florence. And to-day we heard to our great joy that her guardian gave his consent to her remaining. We were so afraid—were we not, Averil?—that he would refuse."

Justin checked the exclamation of astonishment that rose to his lips. He smiled at Averil and said in his softest voice:

"That is good news. I am delighted to hear it. I am sure you were dreading the exile from Aspoli."

"Yes," said Averil simply, "I'm very glad not to be going away."

"We shall be here all through the summer," said the princess quietly. "Perhaps we shall go to Rome for the winter. Averil has never seen it."

Justin wondered a little what Miss Waring's position would be in the house. She had told him that she might have to take a post in the future and even be some one's *dame de compagnie*, so perhaps it was in the character of paid dependant that she would live at the Villa Magnolia. If this were indeed the case it was extraordinarily fortunate that at the very outset of her career she had found a berth that was at once so desirable and so soft. He knew that she was badly off, even very badly off until those mysterious debts she had mentioned were paid. And at once he began to ask himself if he were pleased or not that she should remain in Aspoli, living, so to speak, at his very doors. Clut-

ton's suggestion that he might fall in love with Miss Waring and marry her recurred very forcibly to his mind. But, on the whole, he came to the conclusion that he would have very much preferred her to leave the place. As long as she remained there he felt that it would be difficult to carry out all the plans he had formed for transforming the Villa Annunziata into a comfortable modernized dwelling. Her continued presence in Ascoli might prove a handicap to him in these contemplated activities, crippling him in his schemes for altering and improving her old home. No two people thought alike about these things, and he feared that what he should be able to accomplish would be little likely to meet with the girl's approval. The princess would certainly prove a delightful neighbor; she was a beautiful and charming and sympathetic woman who would certainly be an agreeable factor in his new life. But he was much less sure about Averil. She was provokingly pretty, but she was not at all friendly. It was a relief to him when she rose and said:

"May I go, princess?"

The princess looked at the tiny, diamond-encrusted watch she wore at her wrist.

"Yes, dear; if you are going to the Convent it's time for you to start, or you will be late for Benediction."

Averil said good-by to Justin, who observed that before she turned to go away the princess drew her down and kissed her in a motherly way. There was, then, to be nothing of the dependent about Miss Waring's status in the Villa Magnolia.

When she had gone he asked curiously:

"Is Miss Waring a Roman Catholic?"

"Oh, yes; her parents were both converts before she was born."

"And you?" he said.

"Oh, no; I'm not one. I don't think I'm anything."

"I'm glad of that," he said impulsively. "I'm full of English prejudices."

"Are you?" she said, looking at him with a kind of careless scrutiny. "Perhaps Italy will cure you of some of them. The faith of the people here is a very wonderful and beautiful thing. No one can help being struck by it."

"My friend, Peter Clutton, the author, is a Roman Catholic," said Justin. "I am very fond of him, but often I find him absurd. He spends half his evenings in a stuffy club for poor boys in White-chapel."

"Does he? That sounds very wonderful and unselfish."

"It isn't really unselfish, for he simply loves it. I want him to come out and stay with me. He is my greatest friend — we were at Oxford together."

"I hope for your sake he will come. I was almost pitying you for being so solitary."

The princess always tried to pity people when she found herself inclined to dislike them; it cured her of the wish to dislike and created a more kindly atmosphere. But she did not altogether like Justin and that was the truth. And then it was not easy to find an excuse for pitying an extremely wealthy and self-satisfied young man.

"I didn't realize it was going to be quite so solitary, you know," he assured her, smiling. "You see, I've always been a good deal alone. I haven't any brothers or sisters and my parents died when I was a little chap. But in London I never felt the being alone as I do here."

There was something boyish and simple in the little confession which touched her and made her

like him better than she had hitherto done. Perhaps it evoked within her that maternal tenderness, which was one of her strongest characteristics.

"You must come down here, Mr. Mellor, whenever you feel lonely," she said. "You will always find us about tea-time or in the evening after dinner. Don't wait to be asked."

"Thank you very much. It's most awfully kind of you," he said.

It did pass through her mind then for the first time since she had seen him, "Perhaps Averil might do worse, after all." That little aversion the girl felt for him now might pass off. Propinquity was at the root of many strange alliances. She did not know why, but she felt assured that there was no woman at present in Mr. Mellor's life; he was so free, so obviously self-centered. And until quite recently he had been a poor man, whose circumstances had scarcely permitted him to think of marriage; he was also a fastidious man who would never have been happy in small beginnings. Now that he was rich and able to give much to the woman who became his wife, she felt assured that he would be prudent in his choice.

"I suppose you have known Miss Waring all her life?" he said after a little pause.

The princess believed in frankness, but she wished on the whole that he had not asked this question, although, on the face of it, it was such an innocent and natural one.

She said quietly:

"I suppose it will seem very strange to you, but I spoke to her for the first time last week. I met her just as she had come away from the Villa Annunziata that day she saw you there. But I have known her by sight since she was a darling baby of three."

Mellor looked puzzled.

"Didn't you know Mrs. Waring, then?"

"I never knew her."

"Was — was there anything against her?"

"Mrs. Waring never cared about knowing her neighbors," said Princess Nadine evasively; "she was a very ill woman even when she first came, and we never met. There was absolutely nothing against her — nothing at all. From time to time she did receive the two English ladies who live in Aspoli — Miss Wilkinson and Mrs. Minchin. I have never known any of the English people here." And she looked at him with her grave, serene eyes that seemed to possess a curious light. "Indeed, I have always heard that Mrs. Waring was a very charming woman. She must have been if she was anything like her little daughter."

Mellor thought it wiser to change the subject. It was certainly mysterious and he felt that something lay behind it all — something the princess was not at all prepared to tell him. He was not exactly curious, but he felt that such a state of things demanded at least some explanation. It never occurred to him that Mrs. Waring had always resolutely refused to know Princess Nadine or to allow her daughter to know her. Such an attitude would have surprised him very much, and had he known Mrs. Waring's reason there is no doubt he would have considered them highly insufficient.

"I'm glad to have her here," said the princess presently. "She is such a dear little thing and I want her to be just like my own daughter. I only hope she will settle down here and be happy."

So that was to be the position, and it certainly promised to be permanent.

"It's very kind of you," he said, "but, of course, she is young to knock about alone."

"That's just what I felt. I couldn't endure the idea. I pictured my own daughter — who is dead — in that position."

Averil had not returned by the time Justin took his leave. It had been very pleasant and restful sitting there in the shady garden of the Villa Magnolia, and he had not felt inclined to get up and go. When, at last, he did so, he went along the lower road and entered his own domain by a gate that led straight onto the terrace. Instead of going into the house he sat out by the sea and looked over the strip of blue water toward Naples and Ischia. But his thoughts were full of the events of the afternoon, and especially he found himself wondering why there had never been any intercourse between the inhabitants of the two villas that stood so near each other. Although the princess had earnestly assured him that there had been nothing whatever against Mrs. Waring, he could not help feeling that she must have been a little "queer." The aloofness could not possibly have been on Princess Nadine's side, since she had evinced such promptitude in befriending the girl. Perhaps later on he would learn more.

This evening the sky was very clear with innumerable golden lights that made it seem full of a liquid radiance. There were no clouds at all and the horizon was defined with a sharp precision. The sea lay there like a silver-blue shield, flat and only faintly rippled. As he gazed down upon it he could see again the submerged rocks that lay darkly against the pale, sandy floor. The reflections of the cliffs were as distinct as if they had been pictured in a mirror. He could hear the singing of the boatmen idling on the strip of sand at the foot of the cliff. The summit of Vesuvius was clear, and the

smoke ascended upon it like a gray plume that scarcely seemed to stir.

It was all so beautifully peaceful, and now Justin did not feel lonely any more. He felt that he had made friends, or, to be strictly accurate, one friend. About Averil's attitude toward himself he was still a little in doubt.

But he was not so sure now that he wanted Peter to come and share this idyllic scene with him as he had been a few days ago. There was something strenuous and energetic about Peter which he felt would scarcely be in harmony with this dreamy, peaceful life. Peter had crystallized notions about duty, activity, work for others; he condemned indolence as sloth, and he would certainly not approve of his friend's utterly idle life in these beautiful surroundings. Justin felt almost sorry now that he had written and posted the letter asking him to come.

CHAPTER VIII

SOME days later Justin met Averil alone, walking in the village that stood on a spur of the hill above the sea. The day was hot and she was charmingly dressed in white. He knew enough of these things to perceive that the dress was quite new, and was made too in a fashion that was recent. It gave fulness to her figure and seemed to add to its grace. Her large white hat with a brim that shaded her face was adorned with a little knot of black velvet. He thought she looked less pale than usual.

He went up to her, raising his hat.

"Are you on your way home?" he said.

"Yes," answered Averil.

"Then may I walk with you?"

She said "Certainly," and they proceeded down the hill together. As ill-luck would have it, at a corner of the road they encountered Mrs. Minchin and Miss Wilkinson, and Lupo, recognizing Averil, dashed up to her in an ecstasy of joy, springing almost into her arms.

Miss Wilkinson cracked her whip and called Lupo to her in a threateningly severe tone; she bowed stiffly to Averil, bestowing, however, a glance full of curiosity upon Justin.

Mrs. Minchin, nose in air, walked quickly on without attempting to bow. Averil felt inclined to laugh at their obvious displeasure.

"Are those English people?" inquired Justin.

"Yes. The little old one is Miss Wilkinson and the other is Mrs. Minchin. You will soon know them both, I expect," said Averil. "They are old inhabitants."

Certainly the meeting had not been characterized by friendliness on either side, and Justin's curiosity was powerfully stimulated.

"Do you know them?" he asked

"Oh, yes; of course, I do. Why?"

"Because Mrs. Minchin didn't take any notice of you," he said.

Averil flushed.

"You see they are both very angry with me," she said. "Oh, it is a long story, Mr. Mellor, and I don't want to talk about it. They didn't like my going to the Villa Magnolia — that was all."

She looked so distressed that Justin forbore to question her further. And he was particularly anxious to make friends with her, to counteract that first impression she had had of him. There was a little silence, then he said:

"I wanted to say I'm so sorry I offended you that

first evening. I spoke without thinking. I didn't realize, you see, that it would hurt you so much to leave your old home — to give up the place to a stranger. You must have thought me unkind and cruel."

Averil colored.

"I'm afraid I did," she confessed.

"But you won't think it any more, will you?" said Justin.

He made his voice very soft, as if he were really very sorry, and wished for her forgiveness. It touched Averil in spite of herself.

"Please don't think any more about it," she said. "I suppose I was foolish and childish. It was the thought of going away."

"Then I am forgiven?" he said rather persistently.

"Yes," and she smiled. The smile lit up her face enchantingly. She looked very pretty at that moment; the sudden animation seemed to give color to her eyes. That delicate blond hair of hers was exquisite!

"That's most awfully good of you," said Justin. "You see, I want to be friends. You and the princess are my only English neighbors and I should be very solitary here without you."

"It's horrid being lonely," Averil agreed; "but indeed you are quite sure to know Mrs. Minchin and Miss Wilkinson very soon. They call on every one and they will come and call upon you together, and probably they will have a squabble beforehand as to whether Lupo shall be allowed to come too. Miss Wilkinson will want to bring him, but Mrs. Minchin hates dogs."

"But you know I am not frightfully anxious to know them," he said smiling.

"Oh, but they are really very nice," said Averil.

"You must not think they are not nice just because they are angry with me."

"Anyhow, I don't think that's exactly nice of them!" he found courage to say. Averil said in a low voice:

"They have good reasons, you know, for being angry with me. I can't tell you any more."

She looked distressed and confused. Justin changed the subject.

"I'm beginning to think the princess was right and that I shall hardly change anything at the villa. And I believe by the time I have been there a year I shan't want to change anything at all. I am longing for my friend Clutton to see it. Did I tell you about him? He is a writer—he writes Catholic novels. But he says he can not get away until July."

Averil was grateful for the way in which he had spoken of her old home—she was even beginning to forgive him for having bought it. Her mind was too simple to allow her to give way to the nursing of injuries, and she felt, too, that she had been wanting in charity in her thought of him. This disturbed her a little, for her mother had always taught her to examine her conscience very strictly in regard to this want of charity, to which she had often told her almost all venial sins were to be traced. She knew that she had disliked Justin so intensely in anticipation as a dispossessor, almost as a robber, that when she had actually seen him in the flesh it required but little to fan her feelings into the flame of actual hatred. And, coupled with that want of charity toward him, there had been a tiny touch of jealousy that he should live in her old home, enjoying its beauty, its tranquillity, its atmosphere of peacefulness, and that he should put his own possessions into the dear, familiar rooms and gaze with

eyes of ownership at the beloved garden. And when he had spoken deprecatingly of it all and talked carelessly and lightly of rebuilding it, that had hurt her almost past endurance. It was impossible, of course, to ask his forgiveness for all these uncharitable, unworthy thoughts, unuttered and unknown except to herself, but the sharp remembrance of them gave her a wish to make some amendment, and she spoke so pleasantly and gently to Justin during their homeward walk that morning that he left her feeling that he had now quite counteracted that first unfavorable impression.

As they approached the gate of the Villa Magnolia, he saw that a great clump of oleander bushes had burst into flaming blossom. In the sunshine the rose-colored flowers looked superb; they had only the sea and sky for background and the effect of that pure pink against the sparkling blue was delicious. Justin's northern eyes were still so unaccustomed to the passionate coloring of Italy in summer time that he found their brilliance astonishing.

"They are wonderful," he said. "I am glad that there are simply masses of them in my garden. I hope they will soon come out."

"They will go on flowering all through July and August," Averil told him. "I am glad you like them. There are white ones as well as pink in our — in your — garden."

He walked home feeling perfectly satisfied with his morning. There was really no reason why he and "little Miss Waring," as he called her in his thoughts, shouldn't be friends. He went off gaily to have a swim in the sea before luncheon.

As Averil had foretold, it was not long before he received a visit from Mrs. Minchin and Miss Wilkinson. To his secret amusement Lupo was not of

the party, but Miss Wilkinson lost no time in apologizing for his absence.

"But he begged me to leave his card!" she cried, depositing upon the table a small square of card on which was carefully written "Master Lupo Wilkinson."

Mrs. Minchin glanced at her contemptuously.

"My dear Maud; you need not advertise the eccentricity of the English colony here to Mr. Mellor. We do not want him to think he is among raving lunatics!" she said with acerbity.

"But Mr. Mellor can not live here without knowing Lupo!" protested Miss Wilkinson, reddening a little under the attack. "I am sure you adore dogs, don't you, Mr. Mellor? All Englishmen do — I really need not even ask the question. And you have only to see Lupo to love him — he is such a darling and so intelligent."

"I think I saw him the other day when I met you. Miss Waring was with me," he said.

Both faces became grave and there was more than a touch of censoriousness in Mrs. Minchin's voice as she said:

"We prefer not to discuss Miss Waring. She has behaved in a way we can not approve!"

"Why, what's she done?" inquired Justin.

"Oh, you must not think dear Averil has been guilty of anything *wrong*!" cried Miss Wilkinson, eagerly defending and by no means averse to discussing the matter. "She has only behaved in a way we, who were her mother's oldest friends, could not *quite* approve. But then she is very young, and it was flattering to a young girl to be taken up and noticed by the Princess Nadine — naturally it turned her head and she forgot her solemn duty to her mother." She lowered her voice to a sepulchral whisper. "Girls are often very heedless. We

must not judge her too harshly — I am sure some day she will awake to a realization of what she has done. You see, Padre Lorenzo was in favor of it, and her guardian gave his consent in spite of all Mrs. Minchin told him in her letter."

Justin was completely mystified and showed it. He was pining to hear more, but these dislocated and inconsequent phrases were simply incomprehensible.

"It was quite unnecessary to say anything about the matter to Mr. Mellor, Maud," said Mrs. Minchin loftily. "But since you insist upon being so indiscreet I may as well say that we highly disapproved of Miss Waring's going to live at the Villa Magnolia. The princess is not received by her own people, the Westinghams, in England. There are extremely unpleasant stories about her, and Mrs. Waring, knowing them, refused to receive her and was always afraid of Averil forming an acquaintance with her. She knew that the princess had taken a fancy to the child just by seeing her running about, and Mrs. Waring was determined that Averil shouldn't know her at all. And now when the girl's mother is dead she invites her to go and live with her. But we never thought that Averil would agree to such a thing. She always pretended to be so devoted to her mother, and now she goes against all her wishes in this important matter. And, as Miss Wilkinson has informed you, Padre Lorenzo actually encouraged her to take this step. You will never make me believe after this that Roman Catholic priests are not worldly!"

"Well, there was a good deal to be said in favor of it, I should think," said Justin. "Miss Waring was very young to live alone, and I am sure she is very happy where she is."

"That is not the point, Mr. Mellor," said Mrs.

Minchin. "Averil will pay very dearly for this want of filial loyalty. I warned her that she would be punished for it in the end. If she can feel happy at the Villa Magnolia it shows that she is more hardened than we even imagined. She ought to be feeling remorse all day long!"

"I think you are too hard on poor Averil," said Miss Wilkinson. "It's a great trial to be very poor when one is young. And the princess can give her good food and pretty dresses — that was a charming dress she was wearing the other day when we met you. I never remember seeing her look so pretty. I was terribly afraid lest Lupo would soil it with his paws. When he is over-excited at seeing any of his friends he *does* forget, though generally he is so good! Had you ever seen a lupetto before, Mr. Mellor? When I lived in England I had nothing but pugs, and the first lupetto I had here seemed so strange — I was afraid I should never like him. But you can have no idea how extraordinarily intelligent they are. I should advise you to get one as soon as possible."

"Dear Maud, when Mr. Mellor has had a closer acquaintance with Lupo I am sure he will never wish to see a lupetto again," said Mrs. Minchin. "That is my feeling toward the whole breed and I do not believe I am at all singular!"

"Ah, that's only her way of teasing me, Mr. Mellor!" cried Miss Wilkinson, who could never believe that her friend was in earnest. "You must not really take her seriously or believe all she says about dogs. I know in her heart of hearts she loves my little Lupo."

And she glanced archly at Mrs. Minchin, who, however, did not respond to the appeal.

"Dear me — how sad it seems to come back here," said Mrs. Minchin, heaving a sigh. "We

knew the place so very well in dear Mrs. Waring's time. She was a sweet woman and devoted to her little girl. I see you still have some of the old things."

"Oh, yes; I bought a good many of them," said Justin.

"And you intend to know and visit the Princess Nadine?" inquired Mrs. Minchin, regarding him with a touch of severity.

"I have already been to the Villa Magnolia. I certainly hope to see my neighbors very often."

"And you don't regret the fact that a girl as young as Miss Waring should fall under so evil an influence?"

"On the contrary, I think her very fortunate in having so charming and sympathetic a friend."

"Ah, well; it's easy for you to take up that position, for you never knew dear Mrs. Waring — you can not feel about it as we do. I have told Miss Waring I can not continue to receive her because I am loyal to her mother's memory even if she is not!"

"Ah, I couldn't possibly be as strict as that with Averil," said Miss Wilkinson. "You see, I have to think of Lupo as well as of myself. It would be impossible to cut any one whom Lupo was bent on recognizing — it would give rise to sad dissensions! And, as I told Averil, she may one day be glad of a friend who knew and loved her mother. These worldly, capricious women are often unreliable and Averil's good fortune is hardly likely to last forever!"

"I feel very strongly that it is our duty to show our displeasure and disapproval in a practical way," said Mrs. Minchin. "When I first remonstrated with Averil it was easy to see that my words made no impression upon her. I then made up my mind

to see what deeds would do, and if she has any conscience she must feel that it is a dreadful thing for one of her mother's oldest friends to feel compelled to cut her."

She rose to go. Quite enough had been said to show Justin the exact position of affairs. Of course, it was very natural for a young man to take the girl's part and to go to a house where he was likely to find amusement and entertainment. She and Miss Wilkinson had little to offer him in this respect; besides, it was evident that the princess had already "captured" him. Perhaps she, too, had the thought that a marriage between him and Averil would be an excellent thing for the girl.

"When you have lived a little longer in Aspoli, Mr. Mellor, you will probably hear the story of Princess Nadine's past. I think then you will regret for Averil's sake that she should be living at the Villa Magnolia," said Mrs. Minchin.

Justin, who had been intensely amused by the visit of the two ladies, was a little relieved when at last they took their departure.

"I shall come again very, *very* soon," Miss Wilkinson assured him, "and I shall bring Lupo. You will be perfectly charmed with Lupo. You can not really be said to belong to the English colony here until you have made his acquaintance!"

CHAPTER IX

CLUTTON had written to say that he could come for a few weeks in July. By that time his new book would have been published about two months and he would know "the worst," as he expressed it, of the reception offered to it by press and public.

Although he was always diffident about praising or even mentioning his own work, Justin could read between the lines, and he came to the conclusion that Peter did anticipate a different reception for "Richard Scarsdale" from that which had been accorded to its predecessors.

He had been "hard at it" all the spring, he wrote, and the change would be very welcome; he wanted, too, to see and realize Justin in his new abode and surroundings. Mellor's letters drew quite a pretty picture of Aspoli; he spoke with appreciation of his neighbors at the Villa Magnolia, and gave quite a lively account of Miss Wilkinson and Mrs. Minchin. The Princess Nadine was very beautiful and charming, the girl Averil Waring less *farouche* on closer acquaintance than she had seemed at first, besides being very pretty in a quite unusual way. Altogether he was finding life very agreeable and pleasant, and he was enjoying, too, the uninterrupted sunshine and heat of an Italian summer. He spent many hours swimming in the sea, a pastime which he knew that Peter loved; he had bought a small electric launch in which they could make expeditions along the coast and over to Capri.

A few days before his arrival a letter came from Peter. It was brief, as was nearly all his correspondence.

"I hope to arrive on Thursday. By the way, 'Richard Scarsdale' is really proving a *winner*; they tell me it's selling like hot cakes."

Justin received the letter one evening when the princess and Averil had come over to have tea with him. They were sitting under the thick shade of the ilex-trees on the terrace overlooking the sea. It was another "blue day," one of that long, long succession of blue summer days with glorious sunshine tempered by the cool, fragrant wind from the sea.

"Clutton is to arrive on Thursday," said Justin, laying down the letter.

"Oh, is that your author friend you told me about?" asked Princess Nadine. "The one who is a Catholic and slums in Whitechapel?"

"Yes," said Justin. "He says his new book is going very well. I am glad of that — he has never had a great success yet."

As he spoke he looked involuntarily at Averil. What impression would Peter make upon these new friends of his — especially upon Averil? He remembered suddenly the saying about "keeping one's friends in compartments," and he wondered if this were not the wiser course, rather than generalizing with the French in their, "*Les amis de nos amis sont nos amis.*" He began to feel a curious anticipatory jealousy of Peter. It was not that he was in the least in love with either the princess or Averil, but he had begun to regard the two women as his especial friends, and to resent the thoughts of any one else, however intimate, stepping in to share that friendship.

He said slowly and thoughtfully:

"He is very much in earnest about everything he takes up. He is almost fanatical about his religion."

Averil gave him a quick glance. The princess had told her what Mellor had said about his Catholic friend.

"You must bring him to dine with us," said the princess. "Will Saturday suit you? That will give him a little time to get over his journey."

"Thank you very much — we shall be delighted to come. I am sure I can answer for Peter." He turned to Averil. "He writes novels, you know. But up till now they have not been very popular — he hasn't made much out of them. People don't care for so much dogmatical religion in novels."

"I should like to read them," said Averil.

"As you are a Catholic you may probably like them very much. They are extremely well written — Peter has a natural distinction of style, and he takes immense pride in the workmanship. If he would only write less about his religion the critics say he would make a great success — a real success."

"But perhaps," suggested Averil timidly, "he might think that too high a price to pay — to gain success in that way."

Justin looked at her in astonishment. The words presented Peter's aims in a new light, and this girl because she was a Catholic saw his point of view perfectly and did not even cavil at it.

He said quietly:

"I think it was Mr. George Moore who said that no Catholic can write live literature. Perhaps that is why Clutton's books — quite excellent in themselves — are never a success."

He had always felt that if he had so chosen Clutton could have written a "best seller." But to do this it would have been necessary to purge his novels of religious issues. There was no use in deliberately boring or irritating your readers by introducing a subject they disliked. Besides, it had always been agreed that a novel with a purpose was highly in-artistic. He felt provoked to think that in this matter Averil would be ranged definitely on the side of Peter, would understand and sympathize with his aims and ideals, would encourage him in that work by which he hoped here and there to capture the attention of some drifting soul.

Then he consoled himself by thinking that, after all, it didn't matter much whether Averil sympathized or not. Peter would only be there for a few weeks, and he was not at all a sociable person. He never paid any attention to girls, and it was quite

possible he would never go except quite formally and at rare intervals to the Villa Magnolia. He would certainly want to spend his holiday in active amusements, such as boating or swimming or excursions in the motor. It was in any case absurd and foolish to be jealous in anticipation. And had he not himself stimulated Averil's interest in Peter by speaking about his work, his religion, his books? It was a comfort to remember just then how greatly Peter himself disliked discussing his own novels.

"But surely that opinion would not hold good in France, for instance?" said the princess, looking up. "Would you call Bourget and René Bazin and Henri Bordeaux inartistic because they write of psychological problems in which the Catholic religion — the Catholic morality — play a definite part?"

"I think I should be inclined to say that, in proportion to their insistence upon the religious question, their books do lose when regarded simply as literature," he said.

"I should like to read Mr. Clutton's novels," said Averil presently. "Have you any of them here?"

"No. Peter doesn't give them to me. He thinks I don't appreciate them. You see we are such old friends we can be frank with each other. But if he doesn't bring 'Richard Scarsdale' with him I am sure he will send you a copy when he gets home again."

"I am still thinking of what you said just now," said the princess. "You know I am not a Catholic, so I can speak impartially. But when all civilized Europe was Catholic — before Luther and the Reformation — was there no live literature then?"

Justin was hardly prepared for that; nor was he very anxious to argue a point which would show him as antagonistic to the views held by Averil, and also, strangely enough, by the princess. He said:

"It was not my own idea, you will remember. I was quoting the words of a man — a writer."

"It has always seemed to me," continued Princess Nadine slowly, "that the art and literature which have owed their definite inspiration to the Catholic Faith have perhaps been among the most perdurable in the world. If you go into the churches and galleries of the Italian cities you will realize the truth of this as regards painting."

"That is what Peter says. I know that is the strongest Catholic argument," he answered.

On the following Thursday he went over to Naples in the little steamer that rocked its way across the Bay twice daily. He wanted to do some shopping, and there would be plenty of time for this before Peter's train was due. He could not arrive until nearly one o'clock, and then they could have their midday meal together and leave for Aspoli by the afternoon steamer.

He was waiting on the platform when the train came in, and Clutton's dusty, travel-stained figure emerged. He looked thin and tired and there were dark rims under his eyes. Justin knew by these signs that he had been overworking and needed a rest.

"It's pretty hot traveling now," he confessed as he lifted down a kit-bag and suitcase from the rack.

Then he jumped down and took Justin's outstretched hand.

"You'll find it much cooler in Aspoli," Mellor assured him.

In his white suit and straw hat and white shoes Justin looked cool enough; his immaculate appearance secretly amused Peter.

"We're going to have luncheon first and later we shall go to Aspoli in the steamer. I thought you'd

like it better than the car, the road's so dusty now. Who was it said there was a fifth element in Italy? Earth, air, fire, water, and — dust!"

Peter laughed.

"They were about right, whoever they were," he said.

In the afternoon a shaky *carrozza* took them down to the docks. Peter thought he had never driven over such uneven roads. The great square paving-stones with which the streets were cobbled seemed to have been placed there carelessly on every kind of level, producing a jolting as they drove along that was quite indescribable.

"We haven't much time, but you shall see Naples and die another day. We shall have lots of opportunities," said Justin.

The voyage across the bay was quite perfect. It was very still, and only the faintest breeze ruffled the water that lay there like a great lake, brilliantly blue. Dimly through the golden heat-haze showed the violet shapes of Ischia and Capri. Fishing-boats displayed moveless red-and-white sails. Every now and then they heard the chanting of distant voices. They could see the little white villages clinging to the coast and to the spurs of the hills. A little film of smoke, gauzy, transparent, hid the summit of Vesuvius.

"Yes, the monster's quiet enough now," said Melior, glancing up at the mountain. "But always with that ceaseless smoke he seems to be saying, 'I am only waiting — one day I mean to destroy you.' It is wonderful how people can go on living and planning and building on his very threshold, in the way they do."

"But it's really not more wonderful than for any one else to plan and build," said Clutton; "we are just as near death wherever we are."

Justin made a little movement of impatience. That was so like Peter — his thoughts were always fixed upon eternity, and this world to him was insignificant, almost unreal.

"There's Aspoli," he exclaimed, as the steamer swept round the curve of the bay, "and those are my two umbrella pines. But you can only see a little bit of the tower from here. What do you think of it all?"

"It's rather overwhelmingly beautiful at first, you know. I have never been so far south before."

"You ought to live in Italy and write. I can imagine that it would stimulate the imagination powerfully. And you can live on so little."

Peter shook his head.

"It's all very well for a holiday. But I couldn't leave Monica or — my little beggars, Justin. And, after all, one can write anywhere — that's the best of my trade. It doesn't want a fine day or a north light or anything of that sort."

"Now you can see my villa better — over there between the two pines. And that house beyond with the two white towers is Princess Nadine's." He tried to utter the name easily. "You know I told you little Miss Waring had taken up her abode there. Have you made out my place yet, Peter? Here are the glasses. I always think it looks most charming from the sea. What do you think of my little white home in the West?"

He watched Peter's face with a kind of suppressed, subdued eagerness.

"I think you couldn't have chosen a more beautiful spot. Isn't it awfully Greek-looking? And do you like it as much as you thought you would?"

Justin had forgotten — or almost forgotten — that irritating and novel sense of loneliness he had experienced during his first few days; the dissatis-

faction he had felt with the internal arrangements of his abode, and, above all, that curious but acute feeling of exile and expatriation culminating in hours of intense nostalgia for the comfort of his club, the thousand interests of London life. It had all been quickly dispelled by the friendliness shown to him by the princess in her effort to mitigate his loneliness.

Unfortunately he had been indiscreet enough to dilate upon his solitude to Peter in more than one of his earlier letters. He wished to correct the impression thus produced, and he answered with the least touch of exaggeration:

"Just about a thousand times more!"

"When you first wrote I was afraid that you were not going to like it—that you were feeling a little disappointed. It must be such a complete change after London," said Peter thoughtfully.

"Oh, well, the first few weeks in a new place are always a little trying," said Justin, wishing he had not written so hastily to record his first impressions to Peter. "And one's British mind and prejudices have to be brought into line and made to accustom themselves to new standards. But I've got things fairly straight now, and it's beginning to look as I want it to look. There was an awful lot of rubbish among Mrs. Waring's things and a few pieces that were quite good."

"And Miss Waring?" said Peter. "Do you like her? I always think of her in connection with that pitiful little letter."

"Miss Waring is decidedly pretty and very unusual-looking. She is charming, rather old-fashioned, quite unworldly. She was a new type to me and I rather think she will be a new type to you," said Justin. "She's been lucky to find a home with Princess Nadine. It's odd, isn't it, Clutton, that, though they've both lived here for years, they have

only just got to know each other. But from all I hear, Mrs. Waring was an invalid and never went anywhere and hardly received anybody, and she seems to have prevailed upon her daughter to accept the same seclusion. The result is, she is rather shy and silent."

Peter listened to this speech attentively. Although Justin spoke carelessly, it was evident that his thoughts were greatly occupied with his new friends. He wondered again if in the future Justin would fall in love with this girl and marry her and take her back to her old home.

"By the way, Miss Waring is a Catholic. I've told her about you and your books, and I hope you've got a copy of 'Richard Scarsdale' with you, for she's longing to read it! She is at an age," he added maliciously, "when a real live author is a very wonderful thing!"

"I'm not going to be lionized even by sweet and twenty!" Peter said with a grin. "By the way, 'Richard Scarsdale' is going better than ever. Two editions the first month — a third and fourth sold out, and a fifth in the press. But, all the same, I didn't bring him with me. In fact, I want to forget him a little."

"Oh, I'm most awfully glad to hear it's going so well," said Mellor.

"I shall be able to give the boys their promised billiard-table as well as help them toward their camp in August," said Peter.

Justin felt half envious of his friend's success. Peter had been publishing novels for the last five years, working steadily at journalism as well, and he had been barely able to make both ends meet. He and his sister had scarcely a hundred a year each, and Monica's expenses for doctor and medicine were always very heavy. And hitherto Peter's sales had

been such that his publishers had always regretfully declined to raise his royalties.

Now, however, he was to descend upon Aspoli as a successful author, whose new book was one of the "best sellers" of that year. And he was evidently delighted at the success, although he was utterly free from anything like pride or arrogance. He was by nature simple, and accepted good or bad fortune with the same simplicity.

The steamer stopped at the diminutive quay, and a boat rowed by two youths, picturesque in their scarlet jerseys and white knickerbockers, was drawn up alongside. The boys saluted Justin with a "*Buona sera, Eccellenza,*" and a flash of white teeth. Both were handsome Neapolitans with black hair, flashing black eyes, and skins that were tanned a deep golden brown. Very soon Peter's luggage was deposited in the boat and they were rowing toward the cliffs that rose so steeply from the sands.

On their way they passed another boat with two women in it. One of them — the younger — was rowing with practised but indolent strokes. She was dressed in white, and her hair was uncovered and shone about her face like a pale golden halo that reminded Peter of one of Fra Angelico's golden-haired saints. She made him think, too, of a pale and beautiful lily. They passed so close that he could see her quite distinctly, and it seemed to him that he had always known who she was even before Justin laughingly introduced them.

He leaned over the side of the boat and said:

"Princess, let me introduce my friend, Mr. Clutton. Miss Waring, this is the great Peter Clutton of whose wonderful novels you have heard so much."

Peter took off his hat and smiled, and his dark eyes met Averil's in a glance that was at once piercing and attentive. It struck Justin then that Peter

was uncommonly handsome, with his thick dark hair, his slight regular features, and he looked certainly singularly young for his thirty years. Justin, oddly enough, felt as if he were looking at his friend for the first time, as if to decide what effect he would have upon a very young girl — upon Averil Waring, for instance. And the old secret sense of jealousy stirred anew in his heart. It gave him, too, a quite unaccountable stab of pain.

"I hope you had a good journey, Mr. Clutton. I am sure you enjoyed the little voyage across the bay. It's so perfect on these summer evenings." The princess' clear, slow voice came distinctly across the dancing space of blue that divided them.

"It was very perfect indeed," said Peter, "and it was the nicest part of the whole journey. I found the trains very hot, except just coming through Switzerland, where it was raining."

Then they rowed on in silence to the tiny landing-stage at the foot of the cliffs.

"Well, what did you think of them?" said Justin eagerly.

"I could hardly judge in so short a time, but the princess is certainly a very handsome woman. I know her niece at home — Lady Ann Cheverton. She's a convert, and has started a settlement in the East End and spends most of her time down there."

"I've been told that the Westinghams won't receive Princess Nadine. Something that happened in her youth, I believe. It's odd you should know her niece — of course, I've heard you speak of Lady Ann, but I didn't connect them. And the girl — Peter — what did you think of her?"

Peter waited a moment and then he said quite shortly:

"She reminded me of a lily."

They climbed up the dark, roughly-built stairway

that rose obscurely before them through the heart of the tufa cliff, and when they emerged into the outer air they found themselves on the terrace of the Villa Annunziata.

"I hope you won't be bored here, Clutton. There's really nothing to do except bathe and loaf. We can make some expeditions in the car if you like, and on Saturday night we are invited to dine at the Villa Magnolia."

"Oh, I'm quite sure I shan't be bored," said Peter reassuringly. "And I may get the idea for a new book. That's a very fine crucifix, Justin."

They were in the largest *salotto*, the three windows of which looked straight onto the sea with only clumps of vividly flowering oleanders between. To the right a tall umbrella pine rose loftily and was darkly drawn against the sky. Further off could be seen the thick grove of ilex-trees that made a little *bosco* close to the terrace.

This was Justin's favorite room and he had furnished it like a study, as he always preferred to sit there. All the best of Mrs. Waring's furniture had been collected and placed in this room, as well as the greater number of Justin's innumerable books. There was a beautiful old writing-bureau of ebony inlaid with olive-wood and ivory, and a cabinet that matched it. On the floor were some fine but worn Oriental rugs. A few somber pictures hung on the white walls above the bookshelves. There were antique chairs decorated with Venetian lacquer. Already the place had the indefinable look of the rich man's home.

"Yes — that was Mrs. Waring's. I gave too much for it, I believe; still it is a genuine antique and a fine specimen."

It was lying on a shelf in the cabinet with other curios; vases from Pompeii, old china bowls, silver

snuff-boxes, and curiously carved ivory figures. Peter longed to remove it from such incongruous surroundings.

"I suppose you are thinking it isn't in its right place," said Justin.

"Since you ask me, I am," said Peter imperturbably. "I don't suppose it was in a cabinet with curios in Mrs. Waring's time."

"No — I believe it always hung over her bed," he said. But quite good-humoredly he opened the glass door and, taking out the crucifix, he gave it into Peter's hands.

Clutton held it reverently and, bending over it, touched the feet with his lips.

"Where would you like me to put it?" said Justin, smiling. "You choose a place, Peter. I don't really care —"

"If it were mine, I should have it in my bedroom. Not in a room where people come — where there is idle talking —"

"Oh, I think I want it in here. You see I like Miss Waring to see it when she comes — to know I am taking good care of it!"

Peter, still holding it reverently, walked across the room to the bureau.

"Then I think I should put it there," he said, indicating a place on the wall just above the top of the bureau.

Justin fetched a hammer and nail and Peter, after methodically measuring to find the exact center of the space, very quickly effected the change. On the white wall the ebony cross was violently outlined and the stark, pale Figure seemed to acquire a strange significance. Both men stood and looked at it in silence.

"But I shall see it always — whenever I write a letter," protested Justin presently. "And I don't

want to be perpetually contemplating it, Peter. It's horrible and terrible in its suffering."

Peter said simply:

"You can always put it back in the cabinet."

"I admit that it looks better there. But, of course, it's in a very conspicuous position. It makes the room look as if it belonged to a Catholic."

Although he often argued and differed with Clutton, he respected his opinion enormously and had sometimes even been persuaded into a reluctant acceptance of it. He could trust Peter's taste; there was something both sure and simple about it, and it had nothing to do with what other people thought, or what was the prevailing fashion. And he had an idea that Averil would often find herself in agreement with Peter, not only on the subject of religion, but on other matters as well. They possessed in common minds that were naturally unworldly, simple, and delicate.

"I like your house very much," said Clutton suddenly, as they went upstairs. "I like the atmosphere of it. Don't you think it must make a difference to a place to have been inhabited for many years by good and kind people who cared for their Faith and for the poor, as I am sure these Warings must have cared?"

"Perhaps it does," answered Justin.

He was much less inclined to be astonished or irritated by what he called "Peter's queer views" than he used to be in London. They harmonized better with this new life, with the whole atmosphere of South Italy. They were less ambiguous and out of place.

But when he went into his study late that night to write some letters after Peter had gone to bed and saw the crucifix hanging there, he gave a little shiver of horror. He wondered if it were not really a little

morbid of Catholics to be perpetually contemplating their Redeemer under this one most painful and terrible aspect. Stories of miraculous crucifixes that had moved toward or spoken to ardent saints passed swiftly through his mind, and an eerie feeling came over him. He was not particularly impressionable, but he found he simply could not write a line with that Figure hanging in front of him. He had the curious, almost superstitious, feeling that it was asking something of him — something that Peter gave and which he himself could not and would not give. It ended by his shutting the flap of his bureau, extinguishing the light, and going up to bed without writing a single line of one of his letters.

When Peter had left he resolved that he would immediately remove it, and perhaps hang it up in some room where he seldom or never went.

CHAPTER X

PERHAPS even Justin was a little surprised at the quick friendship which sprang up between Peter and Averil Waring. It dated from the Saturday evening when they had gone down to dine at the Villa Magnolia. As the night was very hot, dinner was served on the terrace at a small round table. This informal arrangement made the little meal at once more friendly and more intimate. And after the coffee and liqueurs and cigarettes had been handed round they all four strolled down to the sea, or rather to the terrace that overlooked it. There was a moon and the sky was full of light; the sea lay beneath it like a wide violet shadow, faintly stirring.

Justin sat near the edge of the cliff with Princess Nadine, who seemed tired and disinclined to walk

about, and Peter and Averil wandered alone together along the white path.

Justin fell to watching Averil's movements; she was never very far away, for they did not go beyond the terraced path, and sometimes he could see her leaning over and looking at the sea. Her white dress seemed almost luminous in the moonlight and it gave her a fragile, elusive look that was not quite human. He could hear from where he was sitting the low, sustained murmur of their voices, but almost always it was Peter's voice that was speaking. Perhaps he was telling her of his work in Whitechapel, interesting her in the sayings and doings of his "ragged brigade," as Justin scoffingly called them. It was unlikely, of course, that he should be speaking of his work, for he intensely disliked talking about it. Only Averil would be certain to wish to hear of it, and because she was a Catholic it was quite possible that Peter might be induced to speak of the aims and ideals he brought to the writing of his novels.

Oddly enough, Justin was pleased to-night that they should like each other and go wandering off alone like that; it did not occur to him to be jealous. He passionately wanted Clutton to know and approve of his new friends, and he desired that they, too, in their turn, should like and approve of Peter. But, like many egotistic persons, he wished to set a limit on the extent of the friendliness his friends should have for one another. He did not at all wish to suffer deposition from the first place. Besides, he was permanent and Peter was only a visitor. The luster of his own glory was to be increased and not diminished by his friends. They were his friends, just as this was his life, carefully planned and chosen, and Peter was only to be allowed to come and look and admire but never really to share.

"I thought they would make friends," he told the princess.

She looked at him curiously out of her long-shaped violet eyes.

"Did you wish it?" she asked.

"I think I did," said Justin.

It seemed to him sometimes when she looked at him in this way that she was throwing a powerful searchlight upon his heart, as if to expose its innermost secrets. It made him suddenly prudent.

"Peter is a charming companion when he chooses. But, like most authors, he doesn't always choose. One often feels about writers that they are thinking to themselves, 'I will not say that — I'll keep it for my book.' They hoard their treasures. But Peter can talk, when he knows that his listener sympathizes."

"And you think Averil will sympathize?"

"Yes. They are both Catholics, you see. It makes a kind of free-masonry. They start from that same strange point of view."

She waited a moment, and then said, with apparent irrelevance:

"I hope that some day Averil will marry. I should like her to marry an Englishman. I have once or twice thought of taking her to England, but there are difficulties in the way and I don't think I'm the right person — it's so long since I lived there."

Justin could realize from what Mrs. Minchin had told him the nature of those very difficulties. To launch a girl in London society under that somewhat damaged aegis would hardly be the best preliminary to a successful marriage.

"There would be greater difficulties in England than even in Italy," he said.

"Why should there be?"

"A Catholic girl without any money would not easily find a husband," he reminded her.

The conversation was taking, he felt, an almost personal turn.

She waited a moment and then said:

"I don't think myself she would be likely to marry a man who wasn't of her own Faith — she told me that her mother held very strong views about it. But she is very sweet and good and pretty, and if it were only the question of the *dot*, I could arrange that."

Justin moved a little restlessly. Was it possible that she, too, had noticed the quick friendliness with which Averil had responded to Peter Clutton's conversation during dinner? Had it led her thoughts to the contemplation of Averil's future marriage?

He saw clearly now why Princess Nadine had chosen to speak to him about it, almost as if he had been an older man who could not hope to marry her. And he fiercely resented her words. It made him feel an inward and violent anger that it should be considered impossible for him to marry any woman upon whom his fancy deigned to descend. Averil Waring — a girl with hardly any money — who was living as a mere dependent in this great house — was it possible, if he chose to throw down the cap, that she would not immediately and thankfully pick it up? But the true sharpness of the blow lay in his sudden realization of the fact that while he, Justin Mellor, with all his wealth and all he had to bestow, was severely ruled out, Peter Clutton, a poor, struggling author, was undoubtedly eligible. Was this thought in the princess' mind when she spoke of Averil's marriage? It was impossible to say, for she had spoken of it only as an abstract possibility that the future might hold. Peter's fortune added to Averil's might produce a sum rather

less than three hundred pounds a year, and Justin had all a rich man's contempt for that paltry amount viewed as a basis for housekeeping. And Peter had other and very heavy obligations. There was Monica, upon whom most of his hard-earned income was cheerfully spent.

"What a pity," he could not resist saying, "that Clutton is so penniless! You might have made a match. But he isn't in a position to marry, for he has an invalid sister ten years older than himself who is really rather a drag upon him."

He was sorry that he had not resisted the impulse of speaking thus, for she only looked at him gravely and said:

"I was only discussing the subject in the abstract. Averil is very young — extraordinarily young for her age. She does not think of marriage at all. She has had a great grief, you see, at an age when most girls know nothing of sorrow, and the emotion has filled her heart to the exclusion of any other. But some day I hope she will fall in love — with the right man — and marry."

He felt rebuked at this quiet setting aside of all personalities.

"I'm sure I hope she may," he agreed, vexed with himself for his sudden lack of prudence, even for the little self-betrayal which he still hoped that she had not perceived.

Their conversation was interrupted, for at that moment Peter and Averil advanced slowly toward them. In the brilliant moonlight Justin could see that the girl's face was very pale, but it had a suggestive beauty that struck him for the first time. Her fair, golden hair looked almost frosty in its pallor. And again she made him think of white, beautiful things, of tall Madonna lilies with their golden hearts, of white snows lying on hills that

drooped to the sea, of the pearl-radiance of Italian dawns — most of all, perhaps, of some white moth floating past in the shadowy summer dusk.

As she came nearer she said in a voice that imperfectly concealed her excitement:

"Mr. Clutton has been telling me about his new book. I am longing to read it!"

She was close enough now for Justin to see that there was a delicate flush in her face and that her eyes were shining like gray stars. A curious sensation seemed suddenly to clutch him by the throat. It was almost as if scales had fallen from his eyes so that he was now able to see her for the first time. Why had he never realized before how unutterably lovely she was? Why had he only looked at her to criticize — to tell himself that she was lacking in a certain chic distinction that he admired in women — that she was narrow, old-fashioned, unworldly to a point that made her dull? Why had he been so slow to see, so that only jealousy had torn the obscuring veil from his eyes?

Peter Clutton was standing near her and looking down at her from his great height with the kind and indulgent look which men generally accord to pretty, intelligent children.

"Ah," he said good-naturedly, "I'm afraid you will be disappointed if you ever read it. I hardly like to put it to the test."

"Is that the new venture?" inquired Justin, leaning back in his chair and regarding Peter through half-closed eyes.

"Yes — the 'History of Richard Scarsdale.'"

"He was converted and lived, I suppose," said Justin cynically.

Peter smiled imperturbably.

"Ah, I simply couldn't tell his story again this evening. Miss Waring has been kind and patient

enough to listen to quite a detailed synopsis. And she has never even asked me if I think it all out first or invent it as I go along."

"I was so interested — I have always wanted to meet — to talk to an author. Mammina told me once she used to know a great many when she lived in London before her marriage."

"I'm only sorry you haven't met a more successful and celebrated specimen then," said Clutton, laughing.

"Do not believe in this excessive modesty, Miss Waring," said Mellor. "He knows as well as we do that the morning after 'Richard Scarsdale' was published he awoke to find himself famous."

"I am sure if you are not already, you will soon be celebrated and — and successful," said Averil shyly.

The story he had just related to her had seemed to her a very beautiful one. Richard Scarsdale's mother had reminded her of her beloved Mammina. There had been something of St. Monica, too, about her passionate prayers for the conversion of her only and beloved son. It was a spiritual history from first to last, strange and poignant in its development. And there had been something, too, in Peter's telling of it that had conveyed an impression of sincerity, complete and austere. Her heart as well as her mind had understood and sympathized. She had enjoyed every word of it, and it seemed to her rather wonderful that Peter should have taken the trouble to relate it all to her in answer to her timid request.

Clutton sat down near the princess. He was aware that he had unconsciously offended Justin, and he could not quite see how this had been accomplished. There had been that little edge of satire in Justin's two little speeches that warned him he was, for some obscure reason, annoyed.

He turned to the princess and said:

"I have discovered I know a relation of yours, Lady Ann Cheverton. She works at a settlement in the East End and is kind enough to take a great interest in my Boys' Club. Sometimes she comes down to sing for us."

"She is my niece — my brother's daughter," said the princess. "But I don't know her at all — I have never been in England since she was born. My brother was married some years before I was, but she is the youngest daughter. I heard that one of the girls had become a Catholic, and that he wasn't very well pleased about it."

"She became one as soon as she was of age," said Peter, "and she has been working in the East End for three years."

"What is she like?" inquired the princess.

"I shouldn't know how to describe her. She isn't exactly pretty, but she has a very charming face, and she sings beautifully. She is greatly beloved by all her poor people." He spoke in a tone of subdued enthusiasm.

Justin rose to go.

"Are you ready, Clutton? I'm afraid we've stayed rather late."

The princess and Averil walked back to the house with them. Then they said good-night and started on their homeward way in silence.

There was more than a little constraint in their silence. Justin was annoyed with himself because he found that his thoughts were entirely occupied with Averil. He had seen her to-night as if with new eyes, and incidentally he had learned that it was unlikely she would ever marry a man who was not a Catholic. Had her value increased in proportion to this knowledge that she was out of his reach?

It was strange, but until to-night he had never

even contemplated the possibility of his ever falling in love with Averil. It was a much too obvious and commonplace contingency; there was something so unromantic and even banal about these affairs of propinquity.

"I hope you weren't bored to-night, Clutton. Miss Waring is very simple — I'm sure she had no idea how you hate talking shop."

Peter's dark eyes grew suddenly grave.

"But I didn't hate it to-night. I suppose we are none of us averse to a little flattery, and she did flatter me by her silent and very sympathetic attention. She made me wish I had a little sister just that age to whom I could always talk about my books."

Justin breathed a sigh of relief. The little sister business amused him. It was so like Peter; he was always blind and deaf to feminine adulation.

"She looked uncommonly well to-night," he said, in a tone that unsuccessfully strove to be light and careless. "It's wonderful how she has improved since she went to live at the Villa Magnolia and the princess took her in hand and started dressing her properly."

When they entered the house he said suddenly:

"You really think 'Richard Scarsdale' is going to be a big success?"

"It's early days. But I've never had one that moved like that before," answered Clutton.

"You'll be able to buy more than that billiard-table, you know," said Justin, with a dry laugh.

They parted for the night, and Peter found himself meditating on this ambiguous speech as he settled down to sleep.

In the morning Clutton rose early. He thought he had never looked upon anything so fair as the

vision that greeted his eyes as he looked seaward from his window. The day had broken with one of those radiantly clear dawns, so still and tranquil that even the sea scarcely moved beneath it. The mountains rose in velvet-like tones of gray, and the sea was white, faintly stippled with gray. There was scarcely any color in the sky, which was filled with a cold and pure and almost austere light. Vesuvius was crowned with a straight plume of clear gray smoke; its summit was sharply distinct. Naples was lying in shadow; here and there on the higher terraces a tower showed like a glint of gold where the sunlight touched it. It was the effect of clearness that astonished Peter, the white brilliant purity of the light, the velvet-gray of the shadows, the smooth mirror-like surface of the sea where the sails hung idly like poised butterflies. It was impossible to remain indoors and he dressed and left the house quietly, and made his way down to the sea armed with a towel. He longed to swim in that cold, white, smooth water.

It was almost ice-cold at that early hour, and the first plunge took his breath away. Peter was a strong and practised swimmer and every nerve of his body responded to the cold embrace of the water. Like most islanders, he loved the sea. It was delicious to lie there idly floating and then to swim strongly forward, pushing the water apart with his hands. It was the perfection of exercise and he preferred it to any other. He swam far out into the bay till from the shore his head looked like a little dark bubble cleaving the surface of the water.

The sound of a church-bell ringing broke upon his ear, and he turned shoreward again. He wished to go to an early Mass in the little Franciscan church near the Villa Annunziata. His body was still

tingling from the sharpness of the cold water when he had dressed and begun to mount the steep, uneven steps that led up through the cliff into the garden.

As he entered the church he saw Averil kneeling there in one of the front benches. The priest had just begun to say Mass as Peter came in and knelt down. Averil turned her head and, meeting his eyes, smiled in recognition; it was, he knew, always the custom abroad to greet one's friends and acquaintances in church instead of bestowing upon them a stony, unseeing stare.

Averil hid her face in her hands; she was aware that at the sight of Peter her heart had beat a little more quickly. She was too much absorbed then to ask herself the reason; she was even a little ashamed of the emotion. Only the very fact that he was there, watching with her as the priest moved quietly before the altar in the first part of the Mass which leads up so perfectly to that great and miraculous event which can never fail to arouse the Catholic's wonder and awe and worship, seemed to set a seal upon their new friendship.

When Mass was over Averil remained sitting there for a little time, for she had not quite finished her prayers. At last she rose to go and she saw that the little church was now quite empty. As she pushed aside the heavy leather curtain that hung in front of the door the sunshine dazzled her; her eyes were smitten by the fierce light. She did not at first see Clutton, who was standing at the foot of the steps waiting for her.

"Good-morning, Miss Waring," he said, smiling and holding out his hand. "Are you always as early as this?"

"Yes. I nearly always come out early. Then when I go back we have our coffee together on the

terrace outside the princess' room," answered Averil.

They went down the street, where already the thick orange-colored awnings had been hung out before the little shops, shading the pavements.

Averil had thought a great deal about Peter last night, and she had not expected to see him so soon again. He looked different this morning — more active and energetic. Last night she had found herself trying to visualize his face, with its thin lines, the bitter shadows under the dark eyes; the way his hair grew against his forehead, the curve of his lips when he smiled. But his face was too mobile to be easily visualized.

She had liked him very, very much when they had strolled about the moonlit garden together; it had even been simple and easy to speak to him of her mother, her illness and death — things of which she seldom spoke. After he had gone it seemed to her that she had known him a long time. She had been glad to think he would remain in Aspoli several weeks, living at her old home, enjoying that beloved view from the upper windows. They would certainly meet sometimes; they would have more talks together — longer talks. Already she had thought of quite a number of things she wished to tell him. Perhaps, though, they would never be said, for when he was there she had the feeling that it was a waste of time for her to talk at all; she only wanted to listen to what he was saying; he had such interesting things to tell her.

He was so different from Justin Mellor, and so much nicer, that she wondered a little how they had ever come to be friends.

They walked on in silence; it was as if the solemnity of the Mass still held their thoughts, preventing them from idle speech.

At a turn in the road they came suddenly in sight

of the sea. All that white light effect had vanished with the royal progress of the sun; the sea was very blue, very sparkling, and the sky that hung above it was intensely blue and quite cloudless. The plume of smoke that was thrust up from the summit of Vesuvius was almost violet now, and it was so still that it did not seem to move at all.

"I hope you were not too tired last night," said Peter at last. "I had no idea it was so late. It was half past eleven when we got home."

"I didn't feel at all tired, thank you. But I generally go to bed earlier than that when we are alone."

"I had a delicious bathe this morning," he said. "I went out almost as soon as I woke — it was so beautiful a morning."

They stood looking at the sea from the road that followed the edge of the cliff.

"Wasn't it too cold?" she asked.

"No — I enjoyed it. Justin always bathes much later."

She said:

"I like it best myself when the water is a little warmer."

"What do you do all day?" he asked. It struck him then for the first time that her life must be altogether lacking in the normal interests and pleasures of youth. Life must be very quiet here, and perhaps even a little dull for a young girl.

She smiled. "I always find lots to do — sometimes the days are hardly long enough. And often I sit out in the garden near the sea and read."

He had a quick thought, clear almost as a vision, of her sitting there under the palms and ilex-trees reading "Richard Scarsdale." It was a very agreeable picture. He said:

"I am sure you must have a beautiful and tran-

quil life here. It is a good thing you can appreciate it — youth generally asks for other things that are more exciting but not nearly so sweet."

She said quietly: "Yes — I do appreciate it. When I thought I should have to leave Aspoli it nearly broke my heart. And the princess is very kind. Sometimes I think I am almost too happy now. Happier than I ought to feel without darling Mammina."

"I often think when there is a gap to be filled — an aching gap that no one can really fill — that God sends a kind, compassionate friend."

"Oh, but that is a beautiful thought," cried Averil, and her eyes filled with tears. "People — Mammina's friends — blamed me so when I went to the Villa Magnolia. Mrs. Minchin still refuses to speak to me."

Peter saw the tears and thought they made her look lovelier than before.

"I don't really mind what they say, for she *has* filled an aching gap — as far as any one can," added Averil.

"I am sure she has," said Peter.

They strolled on to the gate of the Villa Magnolia. Averil held out her hand. "Good-by, Mr. Clutton."

She was a little later than usual, for as a rule she hurried back from church. She went quickly down the long, shaded avenue toward the house and from her balcony the princess called to her:

"My dear Averil — how late you are! I have nearly finished my coffee."

Averil waved her hand, and then ran into the house and quickly climbed the stairs. She wondered why she should have this strange new feeling of being wonderfully and intensely alive. So alive that she no longer felt quite like the same person; she

seemed to be treading lightly on air, as if moved by a new and violent happiness in a world that was utterly transformed into a delicious confusion of color and movement and sweet sound.

But as yet she never connected Peter Clutton with this strange transformation; she thought it had something to do with the beautiful summer-day that was quite unlike any other summer day she could remember.

And again she reproached herself for feeling too happy. It was quite a grave little face that bent down to be kissed when, a few minutes later, she entered the princess' room.

"Why, what has made you so late, Averil? Couldn't you get up this morning?"

"I got up just at the usual time," said Averil softly, "but Mr. Clutton made me late. He walked back with me after Mass and we stood for some time looking at the sea."

And with this very simple explanation she felt that the morning had been duly accounted for.

CHAPTER XI

DURING the next few days the princess observed Averil very closely, but she made no comment. She was perfectly aware that for the girl the world had undergone a mysterious and permanent transformation, and she understood the reason of it much more quickly than Averil did. And she felt a little perplexed and certainly very regretful at the suddenness of it all.

That the girl should fall in love almost at first sight with a penniless and struggling young man, when another most eligible and well-endowed young man was ready to hand, was a real disaster, espe-

cially when the secret of Justin's awakening feelings had been unconsciously but very surely revealed.

The princess felt certain from a hundred little signs that Averil had fallen in love with Clutton, even though she was probably still quite unaware of the fact. It was scarcely surprising that she should have done so, for he was handsome, attractive, and had those twin gifts of personality and temperament. But although the princess had had fewer opportunities of observing Clutton, she felt quite sure that he had said and done nothing to try to win the girl. It had all been far too sudden and immediate for that. It had been rather that lightning-like recognition of the second self which love sometimes bestows upon eyes least trained or able to support the vision, and which can prove so blissful or so tragic. And was it going to be a tragic thing for Averil? The princess knew very little about Clutton, except just what Justin had told her. He was poor and had his way to make, and was probably not thinking of marriage at all; moreover, he was hampered by his invalid sister. Still less did he seem to her the kind of man who would be likely to indulge in an idle, fortuitous flirtation with a girl so obviously ignorant of the rules of that game. He surely could not possess the hideous vanity which will sometimes make an experienced man endeavor deliberately to awaken a love he had no intention of satisfying. One could not read a great deal in Peter's dark eyes, but at least one did not read that. Both he and Justin Mellor seemed to her upright and honorable young men. Of the two she preferred Peter's disposition. It struck her as more simple and less vain and egotistic than Justin's. She would have welcomed him as a husband for Averil, but she was afraid that this idea had never remotely presented itself to him. There was really no reason

why he should not meet her morning after morning and walk back with her from church. It was her habit now to return a little late with flushed cheeks and star-shining eyes. The princess never asked her now why she was late, nor even commented upon it. It was only too obvious that she had met him, walked back with him, and was suffused with a happiness she did not, perhaps, try to analyze. When Justin brought him over to the Villa Magnolia to tea it was quite natural that Peter and Averil should stroll about the garden together. It was impossible to prevent such innocent things from happening unless one boldly warned her of the danger of their offering an impression which might render her unhappy in the future.

And somehow the princess could not bring herself to take that bold and decisive step. For she was not absolutely certain that Averil was as much impressed by this man's personality as she fancied. After all, she was only judging her by that novel tendency to flush and start, by the excited brilliance of her eyes when she had seen him and spoken with him; by other little things of the kind, significant only, perhaps, because she had always been so cold and pale and quiet, as if only half alive.

She was beautiful under that first touch of love. It had lent her a certain vividness, a certain assurance; it had shown that she might under its influence rapidly develop into a lovely and interesting woman whom few men could pass unnoticed. There was a new fascination about her, the more attractive because she seemed so unconscious of it.

Only, perhaps, a great sorrow or a great love can alter a human being so rapidly that those around him are conscious of a perceptible change. And this visible change in Averil caused the princess many hours of anxious solicitude. She wondered whither

it would all lead. She shrank a little from the thought that perhaps Averil would emerge from this first experience a little hurt, a little unhappy.

She was not the only one who observed the change. Justin Mellor saw it, too, and, like herself, he ascribed it to its right cause. And, like herself, but actuated by entirely different motives, he maintained silence on the subject.

The princess tried to prevent Averil from seeing Peter more than was absolutely necessary, yet scarcely a day passed when they did not walk back from church together. She thought that the very fact of their sharing that solemn hour of prayer and worship each morning must constitute a fresh bond of intimacy between them. But she saw no way to prevent it without telling Averil it would be more prudent for her to change the time of her going to Mass. Once, indeed, it had occurred to her to speak to Clutton on the subject, but some inherent loyalty of sex forbade her even to hint at Averil's closely-guarded secret. He must not think that it signified to the girl or to any one else whether he walked home with her or not, and she could never plead the excuse that he was making her conspicuous, for at that hour there was practically no one to observe them.

It was all very difficult, and it was rendered the more difficult by Averil's complete unconsciousness of her friend's anxiety.

By the time ten days had elapsed the princess was convinced that Averil had fallen in love with Peter, and that Peter responded.

Averil began to show a love of solitude when Clutton was absent. She would sit by herself in remote parts of the garden; there were days when she remained on the sands after bathing, reading a book under the shadow of the cliffs. If the princess

watched her, as she sometimes did, with an anxious maternal vigilance, she noticed that the pages of the book were very seldom turned, and that Averil was gazing out to sea in a dreamy fashion as if she were beholding wonderful visions across that serene blueness.

She was sitting thus on the sands one day when Peter suddenly appeared round the point of the cliff, rowing a small and light boat. He was bent upon exploring the grottoes and caves, deep wells of mystery and darkness, that lay hidden beneath the cliffs, where the sea-water ran cold and deep.

"Will you come for a row, Miss Waring? I want a guide and Justin is busy writing letters," he called as he approached the diminutive and primitive landing-stage.

Averil rose from her seat under the shade of the cliffs.

"Oh, I should love to come," she said.

He helped her into the boat and rowed a little out to sea.

The time passed quickly; it was delicious and fresh out there on the blue, sparkling water. And it seemed to Peter that always in the future, whenever he thought of Averil Waring, he should visualize her as a white-clad figure against a background of pure, deep blue, exactly like a Della Robbia angel fixed upon the walls of a Tuscan church.

They rowed in and out of the caves. The deep, dark-blue water, heavily shadowed, looked almost sinister in the perpetual twilight that reigned there, and when they spoke their voices awakened strange, hollow echoes that sounded eerily. It was like venturing into some dim underworld, peopled, perhaps, by malevolent denizens seeking perpetual cover from the sunlight. The dark tufa walls seemed to catch a reflection of the surrounding blueness, repeat-

ing it in the half-lights as well as in the deeper shadows. Averil was nervous, though she did not confess it; she disliked the unnatural chill of the atmosphere, its eerie darkness, its floating blue lights and shadows. She longed to go back into the sunshine, but Peter seemed in no hurry to go; he shipped his oars and sat there, looking at her, talking to her.

He found it easy to talk to Averil; her silent attention was so sympathetic.

For the past five years his life had been one long round of strenuous work, and he had been too busy to form friendships. Except for his mother, whom he had adored, and Monica, whom he loved both tenderly and pityingly, he had never known any woman at all intimately, nor, indeed, had he greatly desired to do so. But in these few days at Aspoli he had seen Averil Waring constantly, and he had thought of her a great deal. Day after day he had met her in church and walked home with her. It had never occurred to him that it was an unwise thing to do. But this was the first time he had deliberately planned that they should be alone together, and he began to ask himself why he had wished it and why he had yielded to that impulse to ask her to go on the sea with him this morning. This brief self-examination sufficed to reveal to him that it had been less an impulse than a plan deliberately formed and executed. He knew that she often sat on the sands reading in the morning, and he had hoped to find her there when he had taken the boat out to-day. He had been half afraid that Mellor might wish to come, but fortunately he had had important business letters to write which detained him indoors. Peter knew that he would have been sharply disappointed had he failed to find Averil under the cliffs this morning. He had wanted so

much to take her out in a boat, to see again her white-clad figure, her pale face and golden hair, with all that wonderful, superb blueness for background.

"I am getting ideas for a new book in Aspoli," he told her.

"Oh, you are going to write about Aspoli?" she said eagerly.

"Yes. I shall try to write about it. But I can never do it justice."

"I shall look forward to reading it," said Averil softly.

"You shall have one of my presentation copies," he assured her, smiling.

The boat rocked idly on that chill, dark, enclosed space of water.

"Aspoli is a wonderful place. I don't wonder Justin fell in love with it," he said.

"We were afraid at first he was a little disappointed when he came to live here."

"I think he felt the solitude at first," said Peter.

"And now?"

"Oh, he's all right now. I feel that he's settled here for life."

Peter folded his brown, muscular arms. He had taken off his coat, and his shirt sleeves were rolled back to the elbows; he looked singularly young, almost boyish.

"He ought to marry," he said presently, and as he uttered the words he looked at Averil.

"Yes—it would be less lonely for him," said Averil simply.

"He would want a wife who would be contented to live in Italy—who would like Aspoli," said Peter.

"Yes," said Averil.

"It is a life, I think, that would grow on one. I

know I shall be sorry when my time here is up. I'm afraid I shall find London dingy."

Averil gave a sudden little shiver.

"Are you cold? Do you find it cold here?" said Peter, with anxious solicitude.

"I'm a little cold. Let's go back into the sunshine," she said.

He rowed out of the cold, well-like darkness of the grotto. They were once more out on the sparkling sea, dancing in the sunlight.

As they passed below the garden of the Villa Annunziata they saw Justin's figure leaning over the white balustrade of the terrace.

"Hullo, you two!" he called from above.

Averil looked up and answered in her clear, distinct treble, that seemed to Peter to float across the water like musical bells:

"Good-morning, Mr. Mellor. It's delicious on the sea to-day."

"I'm sure it is," shouted Justin. "Why didn't you wait for me, Peter?"

"You said you were too busy, and it's too fine a day to waste indoors," said Peter.

"I shall be coming down to bathe soon," cried Justin.

But he did not move. He stood there watching them, and perhaps it was fortunate for Peter that he was not sufficiently close to see the expression on Mellor's face.

The boat drifted away with its two occupants and Justin could see that Averil was leaning back a little and that her face was turned toward Peter. She had ceased to look up at the garden of the Villa Annunziata, and probably they had resumed the conversation interrupted by his words and had forgotten him.

What a strange and odd thing for Peter to take

Averil out alone in a boat. He had known her much longer, yet it would never have occurred to him to do this. What did he find to say to her? Was he falling in love with her?

"Perhaps we ought to have asked him to come," said Averil, who had been conscious of something a little disapproving and reproachful in Justin's tone. She was so happy herself that she wanted every one to be happy to-day in this blue, smiling weather!

"Oh, no — he didn't want to come, I'm sure. He said he was going to bathe," replied Clutton.

In spite of this reassurance, Averil felt a little disturbed in her mind. Of course she very much preferred being along with Peter, and she had felt delighted and flattered because he had deliberately sought her company. She was sure that he liked her — that he did not find her too dull and silent and shy, as she had feared at first that he might. It was pleasant to feel that Peter liked her. But, on the other hand, she did not wish to offend Mr. Mellor, who was Peter's friend and host. Perhaps he was displeased with her for taking Peter away like this, depriving him of his friend. That it should be on her own account that Justin was annoyed never remotely occurred to her. She was so completely without vanity that had the thought ever presented itself to her, she would have rejected it immediately.

Now they could see the faint violet outline of Capri, lying like a great shadowy rock, to the west. On the mainland Monte Costanza lifted its high shape far into the sea, a noble promontory sharply defined. All around them was the flat, blue, laughing water, with only faint ripples breaking its surface like little lines of silver. Naples was plainly visible, with its terraced rows of houses climbing up to St. Elmo, shining like a golden city.

But it was then, looking into Averil's serene and

innocent gray eyes, that Clutton received a sudden shock of knowledge. He loved her. That was what his holiday had bestowed upon him. A love that had come quite unexpectedly, smiting him suddenly, and bringing with it a sense of hopelessness and loss. She was so young; it would be impossible to tie her down to perhaps a very long period of waiting, and afterward to a life of precarious poverty, to the uncertainty of his own career. There was a yet more insuperable obstacle in their path, the figure of Monica Clutton, patient, suffering, unselfish, yet demanding of him many things that he could ill afford to give, and, indeed, could only give by dint of much strenuous work. He knew from Justin that Averil had very little money, something under two hundred a year, and there were often years when his own income was considerably less. Had he been alone and unfettered, there is no doubt that, with youth and strength and love and measureless hope on his side, he would have challenged fate and asked Averil to promise to marry him; he would have done this, too, before leaving Aspoli. But it was Monica that stood in the way; she needed all his care, all that he had to give of attention and love. In his present circumstances and while Monica lived it was impossible for him to undertake other responsibilities and obligations.

She was too young and inexperienced to have learned the meaning of love, but he felt at that moment that he could have taught her to love him. There was so much sympathy between them, so much friendship, a companionship that already was almost intimate.

He was in no hurry to return to the shore. The unwisdom of his little action in bringing her out thus this morning was now clearly apparent to him and he felt that a repetition of the dream must be

avoided. He must never bring her out in this way again. It was not fair to himself and it was not quite fair to her. He wondered even if he ought to remain in Aspoli.

Averil, perplexed at his prolonged silence, leaned a little over the side of the boat and dipped her hand into the water, letting it run through her white fingers.

"I wish we could go over to Capri. I wish it were nearer," he said.

"Oh, it's better to go in a sailing boat unless one takes the steamer," said Averil. "You ought to go over there one day with Mr. Mellor."

"He did speak of it," said Clutton. "We have hardly made any expeditions as yet — there always seems too much to do. I think one gets chained to Aspoli."

"Ah, that's what I feel about it!" she cried.

"But you've given up fretting for your old home, haven't you?" he said.

"Almost," she said. "I think I am beginning to mind less than I did. The princess is very kind, and I've learned not to hate Mr. Mellor for having it. You mustn't tell him, but when he first came I felt that I did really hate him."

Now her face was flushed and a little grave.

"Of course I won't tell him. I think it was very natural that you should look upon him as a usurper. But when you get to know him better, I'm sure you'll like him very much. He's a good sort," said Peter.

"Oh, but I don't hate him now — he is different from what he was just at first. He seemed so superior and contemptuous when he first came. He is not like that now," she said earnestly.

Peter's thoughts were confused and chaotic; for an instant everything seemed blurred and indefinite. Was it true that she no longer disliked Justin — that

she was, in fact, beginning to like him, to see beyond the pose, the mannerisms, the conceit, and perceive, underlying them all but not obliterated, the real Justin who possessed an admixture of such sterling worth?

“With much in you waste, with many a weed,
But a little good grain, too.”

Would that old suggestion of his that one day she might return to the Villa Annunziata as Mellor's wife be suffered in the near future to materialize? Once, before seeing her, he had almost hoped that it might. Now he knew that it could only do so across the prostrate forms of his slain hopes.

With his dark face set, Peter rowed toward the shore. The moment was too beautiful and too sad to be prolonged. He was not sure that he would be able to keep silence if he remained there much longer alone with Averil. He felt that perhaps he would have to tell her all that was in his heart, of hope, of fear, of longing, and of imperishable love.

As they neared the landing-stage Justin stepped out from the opening in the cliff. His cool white figure seemed to detach itself from the gloom of that arched entry. He came forward and, giving his hand to Averil, he helped her ashore. In order to do this he had to push gently past Peter, who was engaged in fastening the boat to its chain. The action was significant, even more significant than the words he now addressed to her.

“Enjoyed your morning?” he inquired, with a smile that made the blood mount quickly to the girl's face.

She had enjoyed it, but it was impossible to say so. Justin's pale eyes watched her ruthlessly, noting the flush, the nervous silence that accompanied it.

“I'm glad Peter's brought you back safely.”

"But there wasn't any danger with a calm sea like that," said Averil.

"Oh, but I'm inclined to think there was. Authors are proverbially absent-minded and impractical — he might have let his thoughts wander."

"I'm sure Mr. Clutton's thoughts didn't wander," said Averil.

She spoke almost with reproach.

"Quite sure?" said Justin, a little mercilessly. "But do you know I don't think even if they did, we ought to blame him."

Averil wondered a little what he meant. There was something light and satirical in his voice that was softer than ever. It was as if that very softness lent an additional edge to his speeches that were deliberately intended to wound. Why should he want to hurt her now? Could he not forgive her for taking Peter away from him for even one morning?

She said quietly:

"At any rate, we have come back safely."

She said good-by to Justin and Peter, and hurried into the aperture in the cliff which led up to the garden of the Villa Magnolia. From long habit she always had to remember to avoid that old familiar entrance which she had used for so many years. It belonged to Justin now, and some instinct of pride held her back from any desire to trespass on her old domain.

She vanished, a swift, light figure, into that beckoning darkness. Both men turned to watch her as she disappeared. Then they sat down side by side on the deck-chairs that were kept for them on the sands at the foot of the cliff.

Justin did not speak. He kept his eyes rigidly averted from Clutton's face and gazed seaward.

"Anything wrong, Justin?" Peter asked at last, with a touch of impatience.

"Nothing at all, thank you," said Justin, lighting a cigarette. "Does the princess let you take Miss Waring out alone like this, Clutton?"

"I don't think she was asked," replied Peter. "But I'm sure she couldn't possibly mind."

"I feel much less certain about it," said Justin, in a dry, disdainful tone. "Although she is a worldly woman, she has very strict views — to us they may seem rather foreign. But it is not the custom in Italy for young men to go out alone with a girl."

"But we are not Italians, and in England there is nothing at all unusual about it," said Peter warmly.

"Miss Averil has had the careful upbringing of an Italian girl," said Justin. "Her mother was extremely particular and I do not think the princess has made any change. I'm not at all sure that you would have had your tête-à-tête on the sea this morning if you had gone through the formality of asking her permission."

"Miss Waring enjoyed the cruise so much that I'm glad we didn't run the risk then," said Clutton imperturbably.

He made a strong resolve not to lose his temper and get angry with Justin, who was evidently seriously annoyed. Why was he annoyed? Why had he attacked Averil with that light, satirical speech which had so evidently perplexed and troubled her? Was he in love with her in that cold, prudent, calculating way of his, wondering, perhaps, if he might not, after all, do much better for himself than by marrying a girl without a fortune? Or was he simply jealous in a foolish dog-in-the-manger kind of way because they had made this little expedition without him?

"I'm afraid you are not very wise, Peter," said Mellor at last.

"Really, Justin, don't be absurd! There is noth-

ing unwise in my taking Miss Waring out on the sea for an hour. I can not imagine why you should think twice about it."

His rough, impatient tone silenced Justin, who would have said more but he dared not. Peter lowered his black brows over his eyes, and when he did that his friends and enemies knew that they had ventured far enough.

But Justin's words had added a fresh complication to the situation. Peter knew now beyond all doubt that he loved Averil and he was no longer so sure that he intended to keep silence to her, or at least to the princess, her guardian, upon the point. And, after all, why should he not speak? Was there any reason why he should not hope? Above all, was there any reason connected with Justin himself which should recommend silence as a more honorable course to pursue? Had Mellor all this time been disguising his real feelings toward the girl? Was he in love with her? His manner seemed definitely to suggest that this might be the case.

And it was absolutely absurd, reflected Peter, for himself and Justin to be rivals. They were so immensely unlike in all their thoughts, their ideals, even in their likes and dislikes, that it was impossible on the face of it for them seriously to contend for the love of the same girl.

"We won't quarrel about it, in any case," said Clutton aloud, at this point in his meditation.

They climbed up to the garden, Justin going a little ahead of his companion and thinking that perhaps he had been foolish to give vent to his annoyance and expose his anger to Peter. He disliked, as jealous people always do, that their jealousy should be known; it is one of the most secretive of passions. He felt, too, that he had been lacking in pride and reticence; that he had, in short, given him-

self away. There was no doubt he had felt angry and irritable and he had spoken impetuously and unguardedly and shown his jealous disapproval of their little expedition. It was the look of radiant happiness on Averil's face that had stirred his anger. Why had he never been able to call up that look into her eyes? He had never seen her look so happy and so alive before. It was as if she had suddenly been awakened; her very beauty was heightened and intensified. Was all this Peter's doing? And why should he wish or endeavor to awaken Averil?

He longed to ask Peter if he often saw Averil in this informal way. But pride forbade him to say anything more just now. He was aware, however, that considerable progress had been made in their intimacy since he had last seen them together. But as yet he knew nothing of those daily early-morning meetings.

At luncheon he said carelessly:

"I've had a note from the princess asking us over to tea. Would you care to go, Peter?"

His good humor seemed to have been restored, and the petty annoyance of the morning had vanished.

"Yes, if you are going," answered Peter.

He was glad to think that Justin had recovered.

CHAPTER XII

IT was Justin's intention, if he had an opportunity, to speak to the princess on the subject of the morning's expedition, and ascertain if it had met with her approval.

Of course, it would not be very easy, and he was

dreadfully afraid of betraying something of his own jealousy thus suddenly fanned to flame.

But when tea was over and Peter and Averil strolled off toward the grove of ilex-trees and palms that hid from view a little sparkling fountain, he said:

"I hope you are not alarmed at the attention Peter is showing to Miss Waring. There can be nothing at all in it."

He spoke with a subdued intentional softness. Now, the princess had been thinking a good deal about Peter and Averil, had been wondering, too, whether, as the girl's guardian, she ought to interfere with at least a word of counsel, or permit matters to develop in their own way. She was a little startled at Justin's sudden speech; it showed her so plainly that he, too, was perplexed and perhaps astonished at the swift progress of their friendship, and that he had considered it his duty to draw her attention to it.

"You don't mind their going about together?" he said, while she was still debating how she should answer him.

"Do you mean his walking back from Mass with her? I don't see how I could prevent it if I wanted to. And I'm not sure that I do want to. I'm only too delighted that Averil should see a little of people. It does her good—she's led so secluded a life."

Justin turned a little red. He had never suspected those early encounters, and he began to perceive that Peter had deliberately kept the knowledge of them from him. It had never occurred to him that Averil went to Mass every morning. No doubt Peter had discovered the fact in the course of conversation and had shaped his own actions accordingly.

"I was thinking more of his taking her out in a boat as he did to-day. They were out the whole morning," he said at last.

"I really didn't know anything about it," said the princess, laughing. "I'm afraid you will think me a very negligent chaperon. Still, there isn't any reason why she shouldn't go, as long as it isn't rough and there's no danger. Isn't Mr. Clutton a safe escort in a boat?"

"Oh, he's safe enough, I should think, especially when the sea's as calm as it was this morning. But he can't have much experience."

"It makes a change for Averil. It's *triste* for her to be always with people so much older than herself. She has had no youth, and I do want her to have a little before she settles down and marries. I think she likes talking to Mr. Clutton, and though he is so clever a man, she doesn't seem at all afraid of him."

"You — you are not afraid of its going any further?" inquired Justin.

He had been longing to say precisely those words, but now that they were actually uttered, he felt a little sense of fear.

"Oh, no. I'm not at all afraid!" She was smiling now and looking at Justin with her violet eyes full of light. "Averil isn't at all susceptible, and as far as that goes, if Mr. Clutton wanted to marry her — it's absurd, of course, even to suppose such a thing when they have only known each other a few days — there isn't any just cause or impediment why he shouldn't, is there?"

"None whatever, excepting his lack of means, and his having that old sister dependent upon him."

"I like your friend," said the princess suddenly. "I think Averil might have a worse fate. But really, Mr. Mellor, this discussion is quite unneces-

sary and premature — it's quite absurd to suppose that because a man takes a girl out on the sea for a couple of hours, he wants to marry her. Mr. Clutton isn't showing her any extraordinary attention. He always goes to Mass every day wherever he is, he said, and so, of course, does she. I don't see my way to prevent their walking home together — in fact, it seems quite natural that they should. At the worst, it could only arouse a little harmless gossip if Miss Wilkinson or Mrs. Minchin were to meet them, which isn't at all likely at that early hour."

She made this long speech principally because she wanted to shake herself free from the very suggestion, to assure both herself and him that there was nothing at all in the affair, nothing but a young man and a young girl finding pleasure in each other's company. If you discussed a matter it often tended to magnify its importance, as if it had taken a mysterious dose of that liquid which caused Alice to grow suddenly enormously tall.

But had there really been anything imprudent in her permitting the affair to continue? She had never had a girl under her charge before, at least not a girl of Averil's age, and she did not see how she could possibly prevent young men from falling in love with any one so pretty.

"There is always a certain bond between Catholics," she continued, after a little pause. "I have often noticed it, and it seems stronger than between other co-religionists. The very fact that your friend is a Catholic has made Averil much less shy and timid with him than she generally is with strangers."

Justin fidgeted in his chair. The two figures had disappeared now and no sound of their voices could be heard. He was sure that they must have gone

as far as the fountain; perhaps they were sitting on the ancient marble seats close to it. It was the coolest spot in the garden on a hot day, and the spurting water gave an impression of refreshing coolness. Through a gap in the ilex-trees one could see the coast and the glittering blue water of the bay. And he wondered what they were saying to each other. He must accustom himself to the idea that they were not such strangers to each other as he had supposed. Probably for the last ten days they had met each other every morning, had had that little secret walk together when few people were astir.

Why had Peter never mentioned this fact to him? Why had he been secretly stealing an advantage upon him in this way? He felt an inward flame of anger when he thought of Peter.

"If she is happy, that's the great thing, isn't it?" The princess' voice fell on his ear, interrupting his thoughts. "I do like people about me to be happy. When I was Averil's age I was very miserable."

"I think you are very kind — very indulgent," he said. "You have been simply extraordinarily kind to Miss Waring."

"Have I?" she said. "It seems to me I've done only the obvious thing. I liked Averil very much — I was selfish enough to wish to keep her always with me — always, that is, till she marries and has a home of her own."

Two figures were now to be seen walking slowly in their direction. The princess looked at them for a moment and sighed. Peter's straight, tall figure, his dark, handsome, attractive face, made an excellent foil to Averil's fair, graceful beauty. And mixed with the look there was a very real and sharp little touch of maternal anxiety. She did not want to lose Averil just yet; she did not want to give her up even to Peter Clutton.

Justin rose from his seat.

"We have paid the princess what the Italians call the visit of Sant' Elisabetta," he said in his soft voice. "Are you ready to come now, Clutton?"

"I had no idea it was at all late," said Peter imperturbably.

"It isn't late," put in the princess gently. "I like people to stay a long time. Don't hurry away, Mr. Mellor."

But Justin was firm. Peter's hint of unreadiness stirred anew his anger, although this time he was much too wise and upon his guard to show it.

They said good-by and departed, and after they had gone Averil was just going toward the house when the princess called her gently back.

"You didn't tell me," she said, "that you had been on the sea this morning with Mr. Clutton."

Averil colored.

"I didn't tell you because I thought you might think it strange — just as Mr. Mellor seemed to. I think he was put out because Mr. Clutton did not bathe with him as usual."

She looked distressed.

"I don't think it at all strange — there is no reason at all why you shouldn't go. I only wondered why you said nothing about it," said the princess quietly. "But why should you think that Mr. Mellor objected to it?"

"Because of the way he spoke — the things he said — when we landed. And to-night his voice sounded disagreeable when he talked about the visit of Sant' Elisabetta."

"Oh, Averil, don't you think you are imagining things? I thought you had got over your dislike to Mr. Mellor."

"I was beginning to get over it. But to-day he

has been horrid," said Averil. "I suppose because he wants to have his friend to himself and thinks that I took him away."

This was not the interpretation which the princess had put upon Justin's scarcely concealed displeasure. Still she did not think it well to enlighten Averil as to her own views.

"Perhaps, dear, although there is no harm in it, it was not quite wise for you to go on the sea with him. Mr. Mellor did speak of it, and, indeed, he may have thought it a little strange. You see, you are very young and you might be mistaken in this — this friendly attitude of Mr. Clutton's. It might encourage you to feel an interest in him — a greater interest than he has any intention of arousing." She looked at Averil with her long, violet eyes almost wistfully, almost as a mother might have done. "You have not seen enough of young men to have learned to accept their attentions for what they are worth. Mr. Clutton is very good-looking and clever and attractive. But probably as he is so much older than you, he looks upon you as a little girl."

She had been wanting to say something of the kind, though even now she was doubtful about the wisdom of discussing it. But she was desperately afraid that Averil might form a romantic attachment for this chance visitor, a man who would probably never think of her again after he had returned to England, but who had sincerely enjoyed her companionship during these idle summer hours. She was almost more afraid that this should happen than that there should result an imprudent engagement between the two.

"It's so wonderful that he should want to talk to me at all when I am so young and stupid," said Averil slowly.

"Perhaps he draws you out. We all feel less stupid with some people than with others."

"Perhaps I do feel less stupid with him," said Averil thoughtfully.

She bent down and kissed the princess and went back to the house. She felt a little troubled and excited this evening, and she had a great wish to be alone. The day had certainly been an exciting one and she had felt very happy. It is true that the princess' words had contrived to diminish her happiness a little. She had never felt that Peter treated her like a child, like some one a great deal younger than himself. On the contrary, they had met on equal terms, and he was the first man she had ever met who had not made her feel young and inexperienced and timid. She could talk quite easily to Peter, and there were even moments when she hoped that he did not find her at all dull. But she had not said all this to the princess, and in her heart she had not greatly wished to discuss the matter with her. There was something to her inexplicable in the strange, excited happiness that Peter's presence aroused in her.

She rose very early on the following morning and went to Mass at half-past five. She had never done this since her mother's death, but during Mrs. Waring's lifetime she had often crept out at that hour so that she might be back at home by the time her mother awoke.

And to-day she had a definite reason for going so early; she did not wish to meet Peter. This withdrawal on her part was instinctive; she felt a certain timidity about seeing him after the events of yesterday, especially after what Princess Nadine had said to her. She must forfeit just this once the great happiness that his very presence could bring. But she wondered if Peter would miss her.

She would have been flattered had she known how many anxious thoughts Peter did bestow upon her that morning. He went down to the sands, but there was no little white figure sitting under the shade of the cliffs. He wondered what had become of her and whether she had fallen suddenly ill. A vague but acute anxiety seized him and he had to restrain himself from walking over to the Villa Magnolia to inquire for news of her. That he should feel this anxiety for one whom he had known so short a time gave Peter a more clear insight into his own heart than he had had as yet. There was no help for it, he told himself; he must speak to Averil before he went away, and the sooner the better. A letter from his publisher telling him that yet another and larger edition of "Richard Scarsdale" was in the press raised his hopes on high. Success seemed to be coming to him at the moment when he needed it most.

At luncheon Justin said to him:

"I thought if you cared about it, Peter, we might take the car over to Amalfi to-morrow for a few days."

"Ah, I want to see Amalfi," said Peter. "Can't we go there and back in a day?"

"Oh, no — it's a good distance and the road's bad. Besides, there's a lot to see there. We shall want several days."

Peter felt that a week ago he would have hailed the prospect with far greater pleasure. He did not at all wish to leave Aspoli just then, and if Justin insisted upon starting to-morrow there would be little opportunity of seeing Averil again, especially as he could no longer count upon meeting her in the morning.

Justin had evolved the scheme with consummate

care. His only fear was that Peter might discover he had some special reason for taking him away from Aspoli just then. But Peter's acquiescence in the plan was so full of simple approval that he felt he need have no fear. And his own wish to remove Peter from Aspoli, even if only for a few days, had become quite acute.

He would stay at Amalfi as long as possible, making excuses for prolonging their sojourn there. He would delay their return to the villa, perhaps, until it was nearly time for Peter to go back to London. He would contrive so that he should scarcely see Averil Waring again.

Yet, while he formed these resolves, Justin was aware of a little stinging sense of shame. Normally he was a straightforward man, and he disliked to feel that he had embarked upon a little intrigue. He knew that he was not acting with what is called theologically a pure intention. And the fear that Peter's sharp vision would penetrate his mean little motive stimulated afresh the little prick of shame till his very body tingled under it.

Until these last few days his own feelings for Averil had been confused and undefined. Once or twice he had thought it more than likely that in the far future he would ask her to marry him. When he had had that conversation with the princess he was aware that this nebulous resolve had defined itself clearly, the more so because he had learned that she was out of his reach. But he was prudent and he did not intend to do anything impulsive or reckless. He was prejudiced, too, against the idea of marrying a Catholic, and he had always resolved that his wife should be either a person of wealth or position. Averil fulfilled neither of these conditions, but she was beautiful and he felt her

attraction. And her present environment, the fact that the princess treated her as a daughter and loved her as one, seemed to surround her with something of the glamour and charm he desired in his wife. In any case, he did not want Peter to step in and capture the prize while he was still weighing the pros and cons and making up his mind.

"We might stroll down to the Villa Magnolia after tea and tell them we are going away to-morrow for a few days," he said, when the coffee and cigarettes had been served.

"Very well," said Peter.

He was relieved to find that there would be, at any rate, this opportunity of seeing Averil before they left. If only he could summon up courage to speak to her — to tell her a little of what was in his heart! The future seemed to him suddenly uncertain; he felt he could not count upon many more meetings. Justin was capricious and always restless; there was no knowing how long he would wish to remain away from home. He wondered why he should want to go just now, when life was so pleasant and tranquil in Aspoli. But he did not stop to inquire into his friend's motive nor to ascribe it to that luckless expedition on the sea.

They found the princess and Averil sitting on the terrace overlooking the sea. From this point you could see the ilex-grove and the two tall umbrella pines rising like gigantic clumps from the garden of the Villa Annunziata. They formed a beautiful dark background of lustrous green for the view they enclosed of blue water and blue sky, and the purple mountains that guarded the coast.

"We've come to say good-by for a few days," said Justin, gaily. "We are off to Amalfi in the car to-morrow."

"Oh, are you really? But Mr. Clutton ought

certainly to see Amalfi," said the princess, greeting them in her charming way.

"Yes. I have reproached myself with laziness for not showing him more of the country. When he goes home people are sure to say to him, 'What, you never went to Amalfi? You were at Aspoli, and you never went over to Capri?' It is such a bore to be reminded always of one's sins of omission."

While he made this speech Justin only once glanced in Averil's direction. She was wearing a large, shady, white hat and as her face was averted he could see very little of it, but there was something in her immovable posture, in the closely-clasped hands lying passively in her lap, that informed him the news had at least startled her.

He sat down, and presently Peter and Averil strolled away as usual down the white path that led to the ilex-grove and the fountain. Justin watched their two figures with a curious attention.

"Clutton's awfully keen about this trip," said Justin, in a soft, leisurely voice. "When I am left to myself I prefer my own four walls. But with authors, they are never happy unless you take them to see things. It's their continual and restless pursuit of copy."

"Oh, I never thought that Mr. Clutton was in pursuit of copy. I imagined he was taking a holiday," she said. Her eyes had softened as she watched Averil disappear. She wondered what Peter would find to say to her to-day.

The situation to her had seemed to become acute and she could hardly believe that a man seriously in love could wish to go off precipitately in a passionate search for copy. The two things were in-harmonious, almost incompatible. Instead of developing, the affair was to be abruptly interrupted.

She was not quite sure at first whether she was glad or sorry. But she was terribly afraid that Averil would suffer.

Averil had avoided meeting Peter this morning of her own will. The instinct of withdrawal, the dreadful fear of betraying love, had no doubt urged this course upon her; it was the natural outcome of a nature delicately scrupulous.

The princess felt a sharp sense of anger against Peter; she wondered if he were studying this girl's beautiful and tender character, regarding this, too, as copy for his industrious pen. But somehow she could not believe it of him any more than she could reconcile Justin's asseveration that he was keen to go away with his apparently ardent interest in Averil.

Standing by the fountain, which threw up a thin silver spray that, falling, splashed into a marble basin, Peter was saying to Averil:

"I am afraid this will be our last meeting for a few days. I don't know at all how long Justin will want to stay at Amalfi."

Averil did not speak. To-day she felt perfectly tongue-tied in Peter's presence. She was miserably nervous and shy and ashamed to meet his eyes. All her happy unconsciousness was gone. Now the only thing she could do was to guard herself against self-betrayal.

"You were not at Mass this morning. I wondered if you were too tired to come."

"I went earlier — I could not sleep," said Averil in a cold voice.

"I'm sorry we're going away," he said, a little mystified by her changed manner. "But Justin wants to go. And I didn't like to throw cold water, especially as I'm sure he is doing it on my account. But I had ever so much rather be here."

"You will soon be back, though. He said it was only for a few days," she said. She was trying unconsciously to reassure herself on the point.

"Oh, yes. We shall come back, but I only intended to stay here for three or four weeks, and I have been here a fortnight already. I shall come back for a very few days in any case. Justin only invited me for a month."

"But he is sure to ask you to stay longer, since you like it so much," she said nervously.

Would Justin do this? At the back of her thoughts there was a fear and dread of Justin. Was he taking Peter away for any reason of his own? Would he ever allow him to return? She remembered his face when they approached in the boat, and the soft, wounding words he had uttered. Why was Justin doing this? She felt an instant of fierce rebellion in which it actually occurred to her to voice her suspicions to Peter. But she realized in time that the self-betrayal would then have been made, and made irretrievably.

Peter stood looking down at Averil with a kind of whimsical scrutiny. She was very pale this evening; she was nervous and obviously ill at ease. He had never seen her like this before. If he had been a vainer man he might reasonably have supposed that the sudden news of his departure had upset her. Her white face under the broad-brimmed hat, which revealed only a few strands of pale golden hair, reminded him more than ever of a lily. She was dressed in white and for the first time she was wearing a touch of color — a pale blue velvet belt folded round her waist, in which she had fastened a few pink roses. The effect of this color delighted him. It seemed by sheer force of contrast to heighten and accentuate that delicate white beauty of hers.

"Anyhow, even if he does — which isn't likely, for I think *au fond* Justin prefers to have his house to himself — I'm afraid I couldn't stop away a great deal longer," he said, with something of an effort.

After all, with "Richard Scarsdale" romping ahead in this fashion, it needn't be many years, perhaps not even many months, that they would have to wait for each other. And he wanted to see if this prospect of his ultimate departure, which could not in any case be greatly deferred on Monica's account, would affect her in any way. But she had braced herself for further blows, and she was on her guard still against that dreadful impulse to self-betrayal. She listened, but she gave no sign that there could be for her any vital interest in his comings and goings. Had not the princess warned her that a man so much older than herself — there were at least ten years between them — might reasonably regard her as almost a child? She stood there very motionless, her eyes fixed on the gap in the ilex-trees that disclosed the faint violet outline of Ischia across the dividing blue. One hand lay against the rim of a little marble table near which they were both standing. The ripple of the fountain broke the silence that followed with its rhythmic, ceaseless music.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Peter laid his hand on hers. She turned and looked up at him suddenly with a startled expression in her grave, gray eyes.

"I am glad," he said slowly, "that we have known each other — that we have been friends. You've made my visit here a very happy one — at least I may tell you that. I shall think of it very often — I shall never forget it."

The flush mounted vividly to her face now. Her hand lay there quite passively; she made no attempt

to take it away, yet he could feel that it trembled within his like a fluttering, imprisoned bird.

"Perhaps," she said at last, "you will come back some day for another visit."

She raised her eyes to his and he thought it would be impossible for human eyes to be more candid, more guileless.

"If you wish it, I will come back whether Justin invites me or not," he said quietly. The moment had certainly come and his heart gave a wild throb of hope. He was so sure, without vanity, that she was not quite indifferent for all that cold reticence of hers. At least he must put his fate to the supreme test, venturing greatly.

"Averil, Averil," he said. He repeated her name twice, and even she could hardly mistake the passion that expressed itself in his voice.

It seemed wonderful to her to hear him utter it in this way, lingering over it as if the very sound held music. And even as she listened she thought that her name had acquired a new beautiful significance when he thus uttered its soft syllables.

He withdrew his hand abruptly, for at that moment they both became aware of advancing footsteps crunching the stones of the pathway, and before they had either of them recovered from the tense emotion that had swept over them Justin and the princess came into view, walking leisurely between the overhanging trees.

Some dim sense of his meaning had penetrated to Averil's mind, although she was still unaware of his still unuttered purpose. But she felt sure now that he was not indifferent, that she had been right in believing that he liked her and had a preference for her society, and that the prospect of going away did not leave him unmoved. The knowledge

thrilled through her and she realized that it was strangely capable of changing for her the whole aspect of life, glorifying it and filling it with beautiful new meanings. Even the princess, dearly as she loved her, much as she longed to tell her, was not welcome at that moment. She only wanted to be quite alone with Peter, listening to his words — those words she would treasure in her heart long, long after he had gone away. And perhaps it would not be many months before he returned. She had wanted to say, "Of course I shall wish it," but she had had no courage to frame such daring words before this unwelcome interruption. She had said nothing at all, and he surely must have thought her most stupidly silent.

Justin's pale eyes swept the two figures. He was almost certain that the girl was struggling with some emotion; she looked both troubled and excited. What had Peter been saying to her?

"We must be getting home, Clutton, if we are to make an early start to-morrow. There's a lot to see to," said Justin easily.

For a moment Peter looked as if he were about to speak. But apparently he thought better of it. His face showed a certain perplexity. And supposing he had flung his little bomb and told Justin to go home without him this evening because he had something to say to Miss Waring first, what would have followed upon this inconceivable explosion?

He was not nearly certain enough about her probable reply to risk such a public exposure of his own heart.

The princess interposed.

"If you really must go, we will walk with you to the gate," she said, and linked her arm in Averil's. "I am sorry to think our pleasant little party will be broken up."

She was impressionable and had felt that there was something tense and expectant in the atmosphere. But it would be quite wise in any case for Clutton to go away for a few days and think matters over. And in those few days Averil could search her own heart and ascertain if she really cared about him. There was nothing like a brief absence to clear up doubts. And, in spite of all that Justin had told her about Peter and his eagerness to go away, she felt that things were certainly approaching a crisis between these two young people.

Justin had somehow conveyed to her that Peter's apparent preference for Averil was a trivial, passing thing to which no importance was to be attached. Perhaps he had really wanted to inform her that there could be no serious intention of marriage on Peter's part; he was already heavily handicapped and could not possibly undertake further responsibilities. Men were, however, naturally inclined to make light of such obstacles when they fell in love. And she was almost certain that Peter had fallen in love with Averil.

When the farewells had been said the princess and Averil went indoors.

"We shall be quite dull without our young men," she said lightly, "but it was only natural that Mr. Clutton should want to go and see other places. He is in pursuit of copy, Mr. Mellor says — that makes him eager to go."

"I don't think he wants to go at all," Averil broke forth with sudden passion. "It is Mr. Mellor who insists upon taking him!"

"My dear Averil," said the princess, in astonishment.

What did the girl mean?

"I'm quite sure he would have preferred to remain here. Now he thinks he shall only return for

a very few days before he goes back to London."

"He must think of his work," said the princess gently. "You know he is a poor man, not a rich one; he is dependent upon what he earns by writing. He has to consider his work before his pleasure, for his sister's sake as well as for his own."

"I can't believe that he wanted to go away now," protested Averil, feeling a little ashamed of her outburst.

The princess said gently:

"Don't forget what I told you the other day. You mustn't attach any great importance to the preference he has shown for your society since he came. You must accept it quite simply for what it is worth."

Averil colored. She felt ashamed now of the effect his words had produced upon her, the unutterable joy that had been hers for a few glorified moments, as if hidden things within her had awakened, and all life had been abruptly intensified and rendered a thousand times more beautiful. The touch of his hand still seemed to linger upon hers, and his dark eyes were looking at her with an expression she had never seen in them before. She had almost believed that he was going to tell her he loved her, but of course that was quite impossible. He could never love any one so young and stupid and inexperienced. Yet his words, "*If you wish it, I will come back,*" at least admitted of no misinterpretation. Now the princess seemed to have laid a defacing hand upon that beautiful dream, filling her with doubts of Peter, renewing the fear that he was regarding her as a child whose prattle amused him.

"But I shall see him to-morrow morning," she thought to herself.

And as this morning she had felt the necessity for even that little withdrawal, so Justin's action in re-

moving Peter had aroused something that was reckless and determined within her, inspiring her with a fixed purpose and resolve to see him again before he left.

This secret thought gave her consolation and for the rest of the evening she was quietly happy.

CHAPTER XIII

JUSTIN said carelessly at dinner that night:
"Will six be too early for you to start, Clutton? I'll tell them to call you at five, and you shall have your coffee at half past."

Justin had been in extraordinarily good spirits all the evening. He had talked incessantly all through dinner, and he seemed almost as excited as a child about the impending expedition.

Peter had tried not to be surly and unresponsive, but Justin's high spirits, far from infecting him, had only served to deepen his depression. He wanted to go away less than ever. He wanted, above all, to see Averil again and utter those words which had been so unfortunately frustrated this afternoon. Delay might enforce dictates of prudence and wisdom, and even counsel a further waiting, and Peter felt impatient at the thought. He had been careful and prudent for nearly thirty years, he told himself, and a girl's white face had undone all the lessons of caution he had ever learned.

Now Justin's unfolded plan dismayed him not a little. He hesitated. Why on earth did Justin want to start so early? He had not at all acquired the Italian habit of early rising and seldom appeared before half past nine.

"I'll be ready just whenever you like," said Peter good-humoredly.

"Six be it, then," said Justin cheerily, and secretly a little astonished to find Peter so amenable.

Thus even that meeting to which Averil had so looked forward, half with fear and trembling and half with joy, did not take place. By the time she had finished her prayers, offering a very special one for Peter Clutton, the big white car — although she did not know it — was well on its rough and precipitous way to Amalfi, climbing over the hills which disclosed such splendid views of coast and sea.

"Adolfo tells me that they passed by soon after six," said the princess, when Averil came into her room upon her return from church. "I wonder why they made such an early start. Perhaps it was to avoid the heat."

Of course it was impossible, incredible, but later when she saw Averil again she was almost certain that there were traces of tears upon her face. She said nothing and avoided meeting Averil's eyes. If, as she was beginning now to fear, Clutton had unwittingly and unintentionally stirred that heart to its first throb of love, it was perhaps as well that he had gone away before her feeling for him had had time to take root. Yet she wondered again why Mellor had acted with such precipitate haste, as if to put an end to a situation that was beginning slowly but surely to develop. Was it for Averil's sake or for his own? There had been something determined and masterful about his sudden interference. Yet, if Peter had meant anything at all, surely she thought he would have resisted being borne off to Amalfi in this high-handed manner; he would not have wanted to go away even for a few days, nor for the sake of all the copy in the world. She almost wished now that she had had an opportunity of sounding Clutton on the subject of Averil.

Men were generally ready to speak of a girl who attracted them to a sympathetic listener. And as she was so very young for her age, so obviously untried, it would have been more natural that Peter should first confide his hopes to the princess, seeing that she was in almost the position of a mother toward Averil. Only — and this thought dismayed her not a little — he was acquainted with at least one member of her own family, and it was, therefore, quite possible that rumors of that ancient scandal had reached his ears, causing him to doubt the ignorance and unsophistication of any girl living under the roof of Nadine Woronov.

For some days they heard no news of the two young men, and the princess supposed that they would soon be returning when she received a post-card from Justin. He said they had arrived safely and were enjoying themselves and taking daily trips in the car. There was no mention of Peter. The princess gave it to Averil, who read it without comment. Although they had now been gone nearly a week, there was evidently no question of their immediate return. It would shorten Peter's last days at Aspoli, and for that reason Averil felt a pang of disappointment.

Had she been able to overhear their conversation at dinner that night, she would have felt a still deeper disappointment, and perhaps some dismay.

"Are you obliged to go back home next week, Peter?" Justin inquired.

Clutton was astonished at the question; it was the first time Justin had alluded to his departure.

"Oh, no. I could stay on a week or two longer if you like," he answered carelessly. "As long as I'm back by the middle of August to take my boys into camp."

Justin fumbled with his bread. It always required

courage to speak frankly to Peter when one had something disagreeable to say.

"Perhaps you'll hardly think it worth while to go back to Aspoli," he said softly. "It's an easier journey from Salerno — you can go by train all the way."

Peter set his face.

"I think I should prefer to go back to Aspoli, even if it were only for one night," he replied.

This was not the answer Justin had desired or expected. It made it imperative for him to speak plainly. As a rule, he thought, it simplified things very much if people would take hints and accept suggestions that were offered. He said:

"There is something I wanted to say to you, Peter."

"Yes," said Clutton, folding his arms and regarding Mellor attentively.

Under the steady scrutiny of those whimsical dark eyes Justin flushed a little.

"Yes," he said again.

"Perhaps I ought to have given you a hint before, but I really didn't think it would be necessary."

"Justin, you're talking in enigmas! But if it's necessary to say it, for goodness' sake get it out!"

There was more than a touch of impatience in his tone. Justin felt ruffled. He had not expected such an arrogant mood on Peter's part.

"Do you remember saying once that the claims of poetic justice would be satisfied if I were to marry Miss Waring?"

There was a pause, and a dull flush darkened Peter's face from brow to chin.

"I believe I did once say something of the sort," he answered with an effort. "It was before I had seen her."

"I intend," said Justin, in his smooth, unemo-

tional voice, "to satisfy the claims of poetic justice."

They were sitting opposite each other at a little table that had been placed outside in the loggia of the hotel at Justin's request. They were quite alone.

"But surely ——" began Peter in a protesting voice that sounded strange and unreal even to his own ears, "but surely — I mean — have you any grounds for supposing that Miss Waring would marry you?"

"I scarcely think that question merits an answer," said Justin loftily.

"I believe I could answer it for you!" said Clutton, almost with violence.

It consoled Justin at that moment to reflect what a barbarian Peter was — so rough and violent and uncivilized. Annoy him in the least and you caught a glimpse of the real, primitive, cave-dwelling man.

"You surely didn't think you were in the running, did you?" said Justin, with a cold insolence that stung.

"I utterly decline to discuss the question with you. I don't believe, and I tell you so frankly, that there's the smallest chance that Miss Waring will marry you."

"And if I tell you that there is? That I *know* there is?"

"It would take even more than that to convince me," said Clutton.

In the pause that followed he searched his mind. Averil had not often spoken to him of Justin; he could remember her saying that she had conquered some of her early dislike to him. But the thought that was strongest in his mind was the memory of that last evening he had spent as Aspoli in the garden of the Villa Magnolia. He could feel her hand trembling as it lay in his like a soft, im-

prisoned bird. He saw her eyes — serene and candid eyes — turned to him in their innocent but unconscious tenderness — a tenderness that gave him hope. His love for her then had seemed to surge around him like a sea. And all the time Justin had known that if he asked her to be his wife she would not refuse.

He remembered Justin's causeless jealousy that day when he had taken her out to explore the grottoes and caves. But perhaps it was not so causeless as he had supposed. Perhaps he had a right to be jealous.

Peter looked curiously at Justin. What sort of appeal could he make to any young girl, outside the fact of his wealth, which surely would not weigh with Averil at all? The red hair, too long now as always and brushed smoothly off his forehead in a fashion which Peter detested and considered unmanly; the pallor of his face, the light, piercing blueness of his eyes. No, it was not a type that could make a ready or instant appeal. Yet Peter was obliged to acknowledge that women had in the past loved Justin; one certainly had broken her heart over him. But they had been older women — women of the world who liked a man who could talk fluently and effectively and who knew the ropes. A man with whom one could dine and go to the play or to look at pictures and pass agreeable hours. But Peter, looking at him now, saw in him a hundred reasons which rendered him utterly unsuitable as a husband for Averil Waring. Even if he had not loved the girl himself, he would have opposed such an idea with all the vehemence of which he was capable. And it was not only because she was a devout Catholic and he believed that she could never really be happy unless she married some one of her own Faith. It was because of something delicate

and fragile and beautiful in her character that he knew Justin could bruise and hurt with wounding words.

Nor did he believe for a moment that Justin's love for her was anything but a passing fancy stimulated by jealousy and, perhaps, by his divination of Peter's own secret. He was not really in love at all; he had come to an age when he felt his loneliness and wished to marry, and his thoughts had turned to Averil.

There was a long silence, in which Peter held up a searching mirror to the situation. But what was the most terrible thing of all was the fact that Averil seemed to be actually slipping away from him through obscure and desolating mists across which he could not see her face. Even if he asked her to marry him now, there could be no question of the wedding taking place for some time to come. The princess as her guardian would naturally counsel a prudent waiting until his income was more assured. It would mean binding her, perhaps, to a long engagement, always an unfair thing to a woman. And he could not do less for Monica than he was doing now; he had often wished it had been in his power to give her an even greater measure of comfort and luxury. The thought of Monica perplexed him; it added such an agitating complication.

Supposing he were definitely to quarrel with Justin, and go back to Aspoli independently of him, and ask Averil to marry him, would the circumstances of the case justify him in doing these things? Would it not be better to wait until after Justin had tried and failed (as he was bound to fail) and then come forward himself?

"You are sure, Justin?" he said at last in a calmer tone. "It is true I have seldom seen you and Miss Waring together. And it did not occur to

me that you were the sort of man to endure the restrictions and conditions which a mixed marriage offers."

Justin made no reply. The religious question was not one upon which he was disposed to meditate; it was like a horrible pill that had to be swallowed with as little grimacing as possible.

"Although where there is a very great mutual love," pursued Peter relentlessly, "even these restrictions and conditions appear less hard, and can also be regarded as a sacrifice laid on the altar of love. Miss Waring is a very devout Catholic."

Justin stirred uncomfortably. The words "*Where there is a very great mutual love*" echoed disagreeably in his ears. He was perfectly aware that at present no such thing existed between him and Averil Waring. But if he could only get rid of his rival he felt confident of his own power to win her.

The words brought back forcibly to his mind the conversation he had had with Princess Nadine on this very subject. She had affirmed that Averil was unlikely to marry a Protestant because her mother had held very strong views about it and had communicated them to her young daughter. Perhaps Peter knew of this; it might well be that in those early-morning walks with Averil he had learned much of her religious views, had had a greater insight into her spiritual equipment than was possible to any one not of her own Faith. Justin knew that Catholics often discussed the things that belonged to their religion with each other without any false shame. The bond of faith was a simple but a strong one. He almost envied Peter because in this matter he could meet Averil on terms of equality and sympathy.

"I think I have said enough without discussing these details with you," said Justin at last. "And

under the circumstances, I thought perhaps you might not care to return to Aspoli with me. You — you had begun to show an interest in Miss Waring. You were even beginning to make her conspicuous by attentions rather crudely marked. The princess and I both noticed it. I think I may as well tell you that they were not altogether welcome nor quite prudent."

Peter felt as if an exposed nerve were being deliberately and methodically probed.

"I confess they may not have been prudent," he exclaimed, "but I have yet to learn that they were unwelcome!"

Oh, she had not reproved him — she had made no least sign of objection nor of withdrawal that time he had stood there with his hand clasping hers, his voice uttering her name! She had seemed rather to have been held by some tense interior emotion that would not let her speak but kept her there close to him, sharing his ecstasy of joy. And if he had been able to say the words that had been brutally interrupted, the words he had so nearly spoken — what would her answer have been?

It was impossible for him to believe that during that time her heart had belonged to another man.

But Justin's tone was so decided, so authoritative, that it was almost equally impossible to believe that he was lying, or even deliberately giving a false impression. He could not be asserting without any proof at all that Averil was not opposed to marrying him. There might even be some distinct understanding between himself and Princess Nadine on the subject — an understanding based on the assumption of Averil's acquiescence. The princess was a woman of the world, and no doubt she would have set clearly before the girl the very sensible advantages that would accrue to her position as Justin's

wife. She would have everything on the temporal plane that a girl could possibly wish for. Moreover, she would return permanently to the beloved home of her youth, from which she had felt the exile so keenly. And from the princess' point of view there was no reason to suppose that Justin would not prove a kind husband, devoted, adoring, and who, yielding to the mandates of her Church, would give her perfect freedom in her spiritual life.

Peter rose from the table and stood in the loggia overlooking the sea. Not so very far off Aspoli was lying hidden behind the long headland, mountainous, precipitous, that formed one arm of the bay. It was the hour of sunset, and the brilliant hue of the sky seemed to mock him with its very beauty. The silver, rippling sea; the broad, golden canopy of sky that hung above it, full of liquid light; the purple, shadowy coastline where the dusk was already falling, would, he felt, remain forever engraved upon his mind as associated with the hour which had brought him this final loss. For the moment it seemed almost too great to be borne, and his whole spirit was struggling in a fierce rebellion.

His face was white and curiously set; his dark eyes blazed with a peculiar inward light. He knew that if he lost control of himself then that he should hate, and perhaps insult, Justin. The discipline of years triumphed — he conquered and crushed the rising passion. But the combat held something that was physical, and he felt a physical exhaustion and weariness when it was at an end.

Justin could give Averil a thousand things which he could never hope to give her. It would be far better from a worldly point of view that she should marry him. The princess would see that her spiritual interests were guarded. He had evidently

been utterly deceived in thinking that she was not indifferent to himself.

She was kind and gentle like that to every one, attentive and sympathetic. She had never meant to trample on his heart with that very sweetness of hers.

"I think you are right," Peter said at last in a slow, hard tone that was quite devoid of anger, or, indeed, of any other emotion. "I will go home from here. As you say, it will be more convenient to take the train from Salerno. There is no need for me to return to Ascoli first."

Justin gave an involuntary sigh of relief. He had expected a longer and a harder struggle. He knew Peter's determination of old, his iron will, his immovability. If there had been any serious intention on his part to ask Averil to be his wife, he would most certainly have fought with more determination. Justin was satisfied now that there had never been anything but friendliness on Peter's side. He was much less sure about Averil, but the impressions conveyed in so brief a period of time could hardly be regarded as very deep or very permanent ones. He had been fortunate in clearing the field of his rival with such comparative ease; he had no doubt now of his own success.

Peter turned to him quite suddenly.

"I think, if you don't mind, I'll start to-morrow morning. If you can let me have the car, I'll take the early train from Salerno."

Justin waited for a moment. He was rather taken aback by the abrupt suggestion, and felt that it might look a little odd if Peter were to leave him suddenly in this way. But, after all, his own point had been won, and it would be safer not to cavil at the details of its immediate consequences.

"Certainly you can have the car," he said.

Peter packed his possessions that night. Even if Justin had wished it — which, of course, he did not — he felt he could not now return to Aspoli. He must go back to London — to Monica — to his hard work, that would hold for him now no little bitterness. But these were the enduring things that no rival could take from him.

CHAPTER XIV

AVERIL was walking slowly down the long street of gay little shops that formed the principal thoroughfare of the town of Aspoli. She paused every now and then to look in at the windows, and at the bright and varied goods they displayed. Of course, they were less interesting at this season than they were in the spring, when thousands of tourists passed through Aspoli, eager to buy cheap little souvenirs to take home to their friends or to keep as mementoes of their journeying.

Aspoli was a great centre for the silk industry, and many of the shops displayed scarves and rugs and golfing coats and stockings, all fashioned of that fabric. Dainty bags and sashes and blouses were also to be seen in abundance. In other windows the rival industry of tarsia-work was exposed to view. Frames and hand-mirrors and boxes of all kinds made of olive-wood and daintily decorated in blue and ruby-red and a warm, rich brown, provided an endless assortment from which to choose.

Many of the shopkeepers had known Averil since she was a child, and she had a nod and smile for almost all of them in response to their "*Buon giorno, signorina*" as she passed by.

The princess had told her to go and buy a pale

blue silk coat; she said it would look charming as a wrap to be worn with her white dresses when the air turned chilly toward evening. Averil had long wished for such a coat and she knew exactly the shop where she would go and buy it. She had never possessed so dainty and luxurious a garment before, and she was glad to think she would have it before Mr. Clutton's return. It did not take her very long to complete the purchase and she soon left the shop with the coveted possession wrapped in soft, white paper.

She walked slowly homeward. It was very hot today, and she kept close to the high wall that bordered the road, clinging to the narrow strip of shade that it offered with the instinct of seeking cover from those burning rays. The wind was fiercely hot — hot and tingling from the fiery sands of the Sahara, over which it had passed; it seemed to wither up leaves and flowers exactly as if it had scorched them with real flame. And it made Averil herself droop a little; she felt tired and rather nervous. The sirocco often affects impressionable people with a kind of causeless apprehension.

When she reached the Villa Magnolia she went straight into the princess' *salotto*, and found her writing letters. She almost always lay on the sofa to do this, and it was in this position that Averil now discovered her. She wore a wrapper of creamy silk which harmonized well with her blanched hair.

She looked up as Averil came in, fixing her eyes upon her with a tender, wondering scrutiny. Then, putting out her hand, she drew her gently to her and kissed her.

"Darling child, I'm afraid you've walked too far in this heat. You look quite exhausted. And with this sirocco ——"

"Oh, I'm not really tired, only it was rather hot

coming back. But I've bought the coat you wanted me to have."

She took it out of the paper and held it up for inspection. It was a pale, almost silvery blue.

"Yes — it's perfectly charming. Put it on, Averil."

Averil obeyed, and then stood there smiling. From head to foot she was dressed in white to-day, and the coat provided an almost necessary touch of color and accentuated, too, the pale brilliance of her hair and complexion.

"It's very pretty — very pretty indeed. It suits you perfectly."

Averil smiled delightedly. She was not at all vain as a rule, but she had a very great wish to appear pleasant in the eyes of Clutton when he returned. Not for all the world would she have disclosed this innocent motive which had made her undertake the hot and dusty walk into Aspoli on that burning July day of sirocco.

"I'm so glad you approve," she said. "There was one of a much darker shade which wouldn't have got soiled so quickly. But this is much prettier."

She slipped off the coat and put it on her arm. Then she stooped and kissed the princess again and went upstairs to her room, softly singing as she went. She felt strangely happy now; that sudden cold gloom of apprehension had left her, and a delicious sense of anticipation thrilled through her. Eight days had passed since Mr. Mellor had borne Peter off to Amalfi, and there could surely be no long delay now before their return.

She was certain that Peter cared for her, and that when he returned he would resume that interrupted conversation, and perhaps tell her so. She had thought of him a great deal during the past week, wondering what he was doing, how soon he

would come back. Not a morning passed now but she fully expected to find him kneeling there in church in his usual devout and recollected attitude. But although she felt that she was awaiting some new and very great happiness to come to her, she was unusually restless, and found it difficult to remain quietly sitting by the sea or in the garden. She took long rambles alone. The princess was always affected by the sirocco and seldom left the villa while it lasted, but Averil was accustomed to wandering about alone in the steep, winding lanes.

One evening, when she was thus wandering rather aimlessly, she encountered Miss Wilkinson trudging along, accompanied as usual by a tribe of small dogs. They were all closely shaven as poodles now, owing to the hot weather.

"Oh, my dear Averil, I have been simply longing to see you and have a chat! Why have you never been near me all these weeks?"

She seemed to forget that she had openly proclaimed her disapproval of Averil's action in going to live at the Villa Magnolia. But her ally, Mrs. Minchin, had departed to the mountains as was her summer habit, and Miss Wilkinson had found herself dull without an audience.

"I didn't think you would care for me to come after what you said," replied Averil, a little stiffly.

The truth was she had been so interested and absorbed during her sojourn at the Villa Magnolia that she had almost forgotten Miss Wilkinson's existence.

"Why, my dear Averil, what a strange notion! Of course, I disapproved of your going to live with Princess Nadine, but life is too short to be permanently annoyed with people, and I often tell Mrs. Minchin so. Lupo, how naughty and tiresome you are, jumping up on Averil's pretty white frock with

your dirty paws! Yes, you shall have a good whipping the moment we get home. He has been so dreadfully naughty all day, and has quarrelled with Beppo, and he gave him such a sharp bite. I am on my way home now, and I hope you will walk with me. I am longing to hear if you like your new life and if the princess is kind to you. You are much better dressed than you used to be, and I like that new way of doing your hair. You are a very smart lady indeed now, Averil."

She chattered on briskly, not, apparently, caring much whether Averil answered or not.

"I was afraid you would never have time to come and see me — you have been, I know, so tremendously taken up with those two young men at the Villa Annunziata. I hear Mr. Mellor's friend is quite a celebrated author, though I have not read any of his books myself. But in such a backwater as this one can not expect to be *dans le mouvement*. You were very fortunate to meet him, Averil. I called two or three times in the hope of seeing him, but each time I was told that Mr. Mellor was not receiving. A little bird whispered that you went out on the sea with him, and stayed quite a long time in one of the grottoes!" She looked at Averil meaningly with an arch, rather sly expression. "I told Mrs. Minchin about it in one of my letters and she wrote in reply that she was sure the princess would not prove an efficient chaperon. But it would never, *never* do, Averil! We're all waiting for you to marry that charming Mr. Mellor and go back and live in your old home. I declare it would be quite a romance — the kind of thing one reads in a story-book. Perhaps — who knows? — that good-looking young author will put it into one of his books and dedicate it to you both when you are married."

Averil flushed crimson and tried to smile, not too

successfully. She was always a little afraid of Miss Wilkinson's undisciplined tongue. It rattled on unchecked every time she met any one of her acquaintance, for at home she had no one to speak to except the dogs and her ancient servant Maria, who was almost totally deaf. The sight of a friend gave her an immediate inclination to *sfogarsi*, as the Italians call that impetuous pouring forth.

They had reached the little gate which led up to her domain, and she entreated Averil to come in.

"Do — *do* come! It will be an act of real charity. I shall have to leave you for one moment while I go and whip Lupo, but it will not take long. Dogs are just like children; one must not threaten them with punishment unless one really intends to give it, or they begin to take advantage at once. Lupo has been naughty and disobedient all day, though, of course, I know that the hot weather does try his temper, and Beppo can be very annoying when he likes — still, that is really no excuse. Yes, Lupo, you understand perfectly well what I am saying."

She led the way indoors and showed Averil into a small, rather stuffy *salotto*. The chintzes and rugs were soiled and the floor was a little dusty. Although the window was open, very little air seemed to penetrate into the room.

She disappeared with the dogs, and presently Averil heard an ominous sound, the nature of which was unmistakably disclosed by the shrill protests of the unhappy victim. Then Miss Wilkinson returned, rather red in the face but looking quite pleased and triumphant.

"You must not think me too severe, dear Averil," she said, sitting down in one of the arm-chairs, as if the process of chastising Lupo had exhausted her. "But it is really very necessary sometimes to show them that one is master. I shall leave Lupo alone

until after you have gone — no, that does not mean you are to hurry away — I never forgive him as quickly as that — and then I shall go and console him and tell him he must not be so naughty again. I wish I could have whipped him on the spot when he bit Beppo, but it was impossible — we were out of doors and there were too many people about. It was quite a hard bite and I could not possibly overlook it. They know they are not allowed to fight and bite each other. I love them very dearly, but discipline must be maintained, and they know I do not punish them unless it is absolutely necessary. Spoiled dogs are so trying. It goes to my heart to hurt poor Lupo, and the poor darling is so nervous he shakes all over when he sees me go and fetch the whip."

She paused for a moment from sheer lack of breath, and then began again on a different topic, which made poor Averil long for a renewed recital of Lupo's delinquencies.

"Now I want to hear all about that charming Mr. Dutton!"

"His name isn't Dutton — it's Clutton," said Averil.

"Well, Mr. Clutton then. How stupid of me, but I knew it rhymed with mutton, and Dutton was the first word that occurred to me. I have such a very bad memory for names that I have to give myself a little help of the kind. I thought to myself: Now I am sure to remember that young man's name — it rhymes with *mutton*!"

Averil laughed in spite of herself.

"I was quite glad to think you were having a little flirtation, Averil," continued Miss Wilkinson, "and though, as I told you, I never saw him myself, I heard he was a very handsome young man. Mr. Mellor isn't exactly handsome, and he has that su-

perior, stand-off manner which always alarms me — you must not tell him I said so, for, indeed, I consider him extremely gentlemanly, and he is very delightful and agreeable, too, I am sure! But you have not told me yet what you thought of Mr. Dutton — I mean Mr. Clutton!"

Averil felt the color mounting to her face.

"Why, I do declare, you are blushing, Averil!" cried Miss Wilkinson in an ecstasy of pleasure. "I hope you have not fallen in love with him, my dear. That would be disastrous when we are all so eagerly expecting to hear your engagement to Mr. Mellor announced. Still, I think it was a little sly to go on meeting Mr. Clutton in church every day, as I know quite well you did. Maria saw you several times."

"You have no right to gossip about me, Miss Wilkinson!" cried Averil with sudden anger. "It is true that Mr. Clutton used to go to Mass when he was here and we did sometimes walk back together. But I won't be gossiped about. You should not allow Maria to say such things!"

She stood up, her face flaming and tears evidently not very far off. Miss Wilkinson was genuinely astonished; it was so unusual for any one to take her unbridled and indiscreet chattering seriously.

"Oh, my dear Averil, I was only chaffing you. You should not take offense so easily. Of course I know there was nothing at all in it. You were quite right to be civil to Mr. Mellor's friend. And then it is such an advantage for a girl to talk to a really clever and intellectual man. I used to meet scores in my own young days, for my father was a very well-known professor, and I assure you we had quite a little salon in Notting Hill. It was most agreeable, and I know that my sisters and I had very great advantages. But you must not think I am

discontented here, for I find my freedom very enjoyable. I am sixty years old, though you would not think it to look at me, would you, Averil? But the dogs keep me young, and I am sure all the exercise they oblige me to take is very beneficial."

Miss Wilkinson's age was not a point which had ever exercised the imagination of Averil. Indeed, if she had thought about it at all, she would have considered it impossible for any one to be as old as Miss Wilkinson looked. With her extreme and angular thinness, her long, hooked nose and peering, bead-like eyes and gnarled fingers, she looked like a very ancient witch miraculously resuscitated from the Middle Ages.

"Do sit down, Averil — you really must not run away just yet. I promise not to tease you. I am only an old woman who speaks her mind quite bluntly — I have always had a character for bluntness, my dear. My father used often to say, 'You'll get the truth from Maud if you get nothing else!'"

But Averil rejected the proffered seat. She felt that she could not stay there and listen any longer.

"I am not offended," she said, with just a little touch of hauteur, "but I don't like being gossiped about. Good-by, Miss Wilkinson. I am sure" — with a smile that was rather forced and wan — "that you must be longing to go and forgive poor Lupo."

"Ah, my dear, how well you know me! Well, good-by, my dear Averil. I hope you will soon pay me another visit. Mrs. Minchin is sure to be away till the end of August, so there is no fear of your meeting her. That is a very pretty dress you are wearing — and that hat is quite the latest fashion. I suppose you get everything from Naples now. Well, well, times change for us all!"

As Averil hastened down the path to the road she heard a chorus of shrill and ecstatic yelping and

barking that finally reached a positively hysterical climax. In the midst of it all she could distinguish Miss Wilkinson's voice saying, "Wassums a good boy, then, and did he think her a nasty cross old woman for giving him such a hard whipping?"

A wave of pity passed suddenly over her. This woman was old and alone, yet could look back upon what seemed to have been a happy and sheltered girlhood. Now she had only deaf Maria and the little yelping dogs for company. Perhaps she had never known love. She was hideous now, almost repulsive-looking, and one could never feel that she had been anything but plain. She never intended harm by those blunt and indiscreet speeches; there was no malice in her; it was absurd to take her seriously. Averil began to think she had been a little unkind this evening in her readiness to take offense at what was said. But when Miss Wilkinson had spoken teasingly of Mr. Clutton she had felt exactly as if something very sacred and secret and precious had been dragged from its hiding-place and exposed ruthlessly to public view and public ridicule.

When she returned to the Villa Magnolia she found the princess walking in the garden in the blue dusk of the evening.

"I have just had a card from Mr. Mellor — he says he will be back on Friday."

She watched Averil's face; the quick flush that stained its whiteness from forehead to chin alarmed her. But she put the card into the girl's hand and walked on a few steps.

It was written at Amalfi and contained only a few lines:

"Shall be returning to Villa Annunziata on Friday. It has been delicious here. J. M."

There was no mention of Clutton, and the omission struck Averil with an almost sinister signifi-

cance. She made no comment; Miss Wilkinson's rash speech had increased her reticence on the subject of Peter. But she would have given worlds to have asked the princess then if she thought there was any reason for this strange omission of any reference to Peter.

It filled her with a sharp anxiety, which did not leave her all the evening.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Friday came the sense of apprehension which had been tormenting Averil ever since she had read Justin's post-card became quite oppressive. She did not dare leave the garden all the morning for fear if she walked along on the road that her action might be interpreted into a desire to meet the car on its return from Amalfi. Besides, her pride forbade her to hang about in this way. She told herself that she did not really wish to see Peter; at any rate, not a moment before he wished to see her; she only longed to ascertain that he had really come back. Her misgivings on the point had become acute.

The day dragged on. It was a burning day of relentless sirocco that tortured her nerves and made her feel ill and languid. Even the sea was a sea of molten brass, making the eyes ache to look upon it. The air was sultry and oppressive, and every now and then there was a gust of fiery wind that resembled the blast from a red-hot furnace.

After tea it was a little cooler and the princess said:

"Hadn't you better go for a little walk? You are looking so pale, Averil."

She saw no reason why the girl should look so

languid and drooping. Was she thinking of Peter?

"Don't you want to go? Are you too tired?" she asked, as Averil rose languidly and then stood still with a certain hesitation.

"I should like to go. But not very far. You — you won't come, too?"

The princess shook her head. "No. I'll stay in the garden. But I think a little walk will do you good."

She walked straight up the hill after leaving the gate, afraid to take the road that led to the Villa Annunziata. There was something terrible to Averil about the delay and uncertainty of Peter's return. They must have left Amalfi very late not to be back at Aspoli by this time. And perhaps there would be a further delay before he appeared at the Villa Magnolia. She was glad that the princess had suggested she should go for a walk; it would help to fill up the time. She would not go very far, nor stay out very long; it was quite possible that Peter might arrive in her absence and perhaps stop at the villa on his way.

She felt sure he must be as anxious to see her as she was to see him.

A shrill yelping fell upon her ear, and before she could turn and flee in the opposite direction Miss Wilkinson had appeared round the corner of the lane and was waving a whip wildly in her direction. "Stop, Averil!" she cried in a loud tone. "Down, Lupo — do not please get so excited." She ran with extraordinary agility down the steep hill that separated herself from Averil.

"Oh, my dear — I have such an exciting piece of news for you! But perhaps you have already heard it. Mr. Mellor has come back — I met him in the car about half past two. He had only the chauffeur with him. I do not think he wanted to stop — he

seemed in a great hurry — but he could not really help himself, for Lupo ran right in front of the car and I thought at one moment the dear precious little darling would have been killed. Such an escape! I can not describe my feelings. And when he stopped, fortunately just in time, I said, 'What have you done with your charming friend?' And he said, 'Oh, Clutton's had to go back to London — he left Salerno yesterday morning.'"

Averil felt as if her heart had suddenly stopped beating. She felt an actual physical pain that made her for the moment quite sick and dizzy. Miss Wilkinson seemed to her like a sinister witch eager to convey ill tidings. Her shrill voice beat on poor Averil's tortured nerves.

"I thought it would interest you to hear that Mr. Mellor has come back — and come back alone," continued Miss Wilkinson, happily quite unaware of the effect of her words. "And I am sure you will be glad to hear, my dear, that Lupo has been very good all day. It really wasn't his fault that he was so nearly run over — the chauffeur was quite disagreeable about it and said the car was nearly overturned in consequence of having to get out of his way. But it was only thoughtlessness on dear Lupo's part. He did not mean any harm; indeed, he has been perfectly good ever since that whipping I gave him the day you came. He has not once fought with Beppo, which is wonderful in this hot weather, when their dear doggy tempers always get a little on edge. You will see that I shall not have to whip him severely again for quite a long time. Mr. Mellor looked very pleased with himself and said he was glad to come back home; he spoke quite affably. But you will soon be seeing him for yourself, my dear," she added, with an arch and meaning smile. "Oh, I am not going to tease you again,

Averil, but I do hope you will not keep that young man waiting too long. I am so looking forward to seeing you back at your own villa. I shall never feel quite the same toward you while you are at the Magnolia, though I am sure it must be very comfortable."

"I have been out too long — I must be getting back," said Averil in a strange, harsh voice that did not sound like her own. But her throat was dry and threatened to close, such an enormous lump had risen there. It hurt her to speak, and she had a queer, burning sensation behind her eyes that made them smart and feel as if they were on fire.

She went slowly back to the Villa Magnolia. Fortunately she met no one and was able to escape up to her room unobserved. She felt that she must be alone for a little while to win back something of her calm and self-control. Above all, she must keep herself from crying. It would be terrible to cry and thus expose her grief and disappointment. She sat down by the window and looked seaward, but though she tried to force them back, the tears came to her eyes, flooding them and obscuring everything with their burning mist.

Even now she could hardly realize that Peter had actually gone. She tried to believe that there was some mistake. Probably Miss Wilkinson had not listened at all to what Justin was saying; she had most likely insisted upon giving him a detailed account of Lupo's delinquencies and recent castigation. But whether she had listened or not, it was quite certain that Mr. Mellor had come back quite alone, and that Peter was not with him.

A passionate resentment against Miss Wilkinson rose to her heart. She had been so eager to convey the bad news; it almost seemed to Averil that in some obscure way she was even responsible for it.

Oh, but there must have been a reason for this sudden departure, an important reason which Justin — in the hurry of the moment and in his eagerness to get back home — had omitted to reveal to the chattering old maid. Perhaps it was connected with business — with his publishers, or with Monica's health. There were hundreds of things which might have called him imperatively back to town. But could he not have spared a few hours to pass through Aspoli and say good-by to her on his way?

Averil had then a sense of irremediable loss, almost as great as that which she had experienced on the night of her mother's death. But this one brought with it, in addition to grief, a sense of shame. She realized for perhaps the first time that she had given her whole heart into this man's keeping, and she feared that the fact must be apparent even to those around her. It was terrible to think that every one should know she had loved Peter — and that he had not loved her.

She threw back her head. No — she must not cry. Tears would only add to the sum of knowledge possessed by those around her. She drank some cold water and bathed her face and then went and looked at herself in the glass. She saw a grave, haggard, white face with miserable, almost colorless eyes — cold, hopeless eyes. And she had been so happy all day, even across her anxiety and misgiving there had been moments when every nerve had thrilled at the thought of that meeting which could not long be delayed. It had been so delightful to wonder what he would say when he came, how he would look. Her mind had been full of innocent girlish dreams woven round the figure of Peter Clutton. And now everything was at an end. Peter had gone back to London, and Justin had returned alone to the Villa Annunziata.

Had the princess feared that something of the kind might happen when she had warned her not to mistake his friendly attitude nor let it arouse a deeper interest than he had any intention of evoking? Those kind, wise words came back to her now, and she wondered a little what had prompted her to say them. Had Justin said anything to the princess — anything that would make her think it advisable to warn Averil? Justin might well be in Peter's confidence; perhaps he had known even then that Clutton would not return to Aspoli with him. And she felt that between the princess and Justin she had been the little, helpless victim of an intrigue, undertaken, it is true, for her good and for the sole purpose of saving her from pain — this very pain which was tearing at her heart. This thought, terrible in its simplicity and also in its probability, obsessed her mind. But — they had not saved her from pain. The wise people had shut the door only after the treasure had been stolen. And almost always — almost from the first — any interference on their part would have been too late. That Averil was obliged reluctantly to acknowledge to herself. From the first day there had been something about Peter Clutton, something swiftly and compellingly sympathetic, that had awakened within her a different feeling from any she had ever known. It had been so fatally easy to talk to him, so delicious to listen to him, so strange to thrill at the very sound of his coming feet in an ecstasy of secret excitement. All those emotions, intensified day by day as time went on and the intimacy of their friendship deepened, had seemed to wrap her very body in a soft and caressing atmosphere. She had not tried to realize at first what it all meant. She had no knowledge nor experience of love, of its restlessness, its eagerness, its undefined hopes and fears, the convulsive change it is so swift to produce in

the most tranquil or the most somber life. All the time that Peter had stayed in Aspoli she felt that she had been living in a beautiful dream. Now, with a cold and brutally rough shock, she had been awakened. Every nerve quivered with pain and, what was worse than pain, a feeling of indescribable humiliation that was almost degrading.

Every one must have seen her foolish blindness, her obstinacy in spite of warnings so plainly bestowed. The princess had undoubtedly discerned the whole situation; she had feared that this would happen. That mattered much less, but the feeling that Justin had also seen and discerned filled her with a shame that was insupportable. How could she meet him again — look him in the face — aware that he was in possession of this knowledge of her love for Peter? How could she listen when Peter's name was mentioned — as mentioned it must certainly be — and not betray her emotion? In that hour Averil desired for the first time in her life to leave Aspoli. Even the once-dreaded *pension* in Florence seemed a most desirable refuge.

Mrs. Minchin's words recurred to her with the force of a baleful prophecy suddenly fulfilled. "*Mark my words, Averil, if you do this thing, you will be punished for it. And if you are punished, you will know that you thoroughly deserved it.*"

Was it true she was being punished for coming to live at the Villa Magnolia? She could not quite believe it, for she had done nothing wrong, nothing contrary to her confessor's advice, in coming. This crisis seemed to her, indeed, more like one of those fierce and fiery trials which are sometimes sent to strengthen one's detachment from creatures, because God is a jealous God.

"Averil! Averil!" called a voice below her win-

dow. "Mr. Mellor is here, and I want you to come down."

It was past seven o'clock — a late hour for Mr. Mellor to pay a visit, but perhaps he already had been there for some time.

Averil answered, "I am coming," and then crossed the room and looked at herself once more in the mirror. Although her face was a little flushed, with two hard patches of pink in either cheek, there were no traces of tears in her eyes. She put on a hat and went downstairs holding her head high. Indeed, there was something a little proud and queenly in her aspect, in her firm tread.

They were sitting out on the terrace under a dark-blue awning, and Justin was leaning back lazily in a basket-chair with a cushion behind his head. He wore a white suit and a bluish tie, silk socks that matched the tie, and spotless white shoes. She thought she had never seen him so carefully dressed before. His red hair was uncovered; there was a glossy brilliancy about it to-day as if it had undergone a lengthy brushing. The easy attitude in which he was lounging suited his slight and rather graceful figure. But he sprang up eagerly as Averil walked out onto the terrace.

Although she was flushed and looked excited and nervous, her features were grave and composed. She was consciously wearing a mask for the first time in her life.

"I've come back alone, Miss Waring. Peter heard important news that necessitated his return to London."

Both he and the princess involuntarily looked at her, and Averil was aware of their scrutiny. But she was prepared for it. She knew they would wish to see if the news had affected her. But while the princess' glance was tenderly anxious, full of an al-

most pitiful solicitude, Justin's was curious and eager.

"So I heard," she said tranquilly. "I met Miss Wilkinson while I was out. She said Lupo ran in front of the car and was nearly killed."

"So he was — the little brute!" said Justin, with a laugh which seemed to relieve the slight tension of the atmosphere.

"It had nothing to do with Mr. Clutton's sister, I am glad to say," continued the princess, turning to Averil. "Mr. Mellor says the business which called Mr. Clutton home was a private one."

"It was a pity he had to cut short his visit in this way," said Justin. "And he was enjoying Amalfi enormously. I'm sorry now we did not go to Capri first."

Averil did not speak. Her outward calmness completely deceived Justin and his hopes soared. He had got rid of one who promised to be a dangerous rival at a moment when the danger was becoming acute. It had been sharp work, and not altogether easy, but he had accomplished it and he felt almost proud of his success. Conscience was wonderfully quiescent; he had expected it to remonstrate a little just at first.

Averil had received the news quite indifferently. But then, of course, she had been in some sense prepared by Miss Wilkinson. Foolish, chattering old maid! It was the worst of luck that Lupo had run in front of the car, apparently bent on suicide, and obliging him to stop. Otherwise he could have told his own news in his own way and watched the effect.

"We had a delightful trip," he continued, "but of course I'm very glad to be back. It's the first time I have returned in this way to the villa and I realized what a homecoming might mean."

"You were so glad to see it again?" Averil asked absently. Her face was turned seaward, and she was sitting there in a very motionless way. Somewhere out there in the west, far behind the sunset, was — Peter. Already his figure was becoming a little obscured, so completely had it passed out of sight. She seemed to be dreaming, and the dream held a fierce, unceasing pain that tore at her heart with wild, sharp fingers. She wondered how long she could sit there and bear it in silence.

"He begged me to give you both all sorts of kind messages and regrets," said Justin, in his smooth, suave voice.

There was small consolation to be gained from that conventional message.

"I shall miss him very much," he added. "And I'm afraid he won't be able to spare the time for another visit for ever so long. He's such a busy, hard-working chap, and then he's so tied at home with that sister of his."

"I'm sure we shall miss him, too," said the princess.

She wished Averil would speak and make some commonplace assent, but she still sat there silently. Although she looked so little attentive, those words of Justin's had taken all the hope out of her heart, leaving it as cold as a stone. She wanted to cry out as one undergoing torture. She wanted to speak, to accuse Justin of having got rid of Peter.

For had not Peter himself told her that he had not liked to throw cold water on the proposed trip because Mellor seemed so keen about it? It was to please Justin that he had gone to Amalfi. Perhaps it was also to please him that he had gone now to London.

The young man was perfectly unconscious of this interior storm raging in Averil's heart. He would

have been disconcerted, to say the least of it, had he imagined for one moment that she had thus astonishingly discovered the intrigue which had summarily removed Peter from their midst. He had forgotten to reckon with that sixth sense which love bestows, especially when it is threatened with severance from its beloved. And the girl was careful to give no sign of her hot anger so securely concealed behind that white mask with its two pink patches.

Justin seemed to her immensely and unscrupulously powerful, using his power secretly as if resolved not to disclose or reveal it. But events betrayed it, and she, his victim, felt it like the approach of some obscure but ghastly force, grinding her to the earth.

How could she ever have doubted Peter — even in that hour when she had fought and struggled alone with that tempest of grief? He was only her fellow-victim.

"I hope that, in spite of his being so busy, he will find time to come back one of these days," said Princess Nadine, after a pause during which she had hoped that Averil would speak and Averil had remained silent.

"Oh, as to that, I don't know. He was here long enough to get all he wanted in the way of copy, and he's a very queer fellow. Latterly it seemed as if he'd taken almost a dislike to Aspoli," said Justin. "I don't think, anyhow, he is keen enough about it to want to come back."

Averil longed to contradict this — to tell him plainly how reluctant Peter had been to leave, how little he had desired to go to Amalfi. But she dared not. What if those very words of Peter's had been a mere conventional expression of regret? What if, after all, they had been false and deceitful words? Her faith had been rudely shaken; she was no longer

able to attach any value or meaning to words. They had all alike become ambiguous.

"Oh, I'm quite sorry to hear that," said the princess in a tone that held no little surprise. "I thought he seemed to like being here."

Justin shook his head.

"You can never tell with Peter. He's awfully queer in some ways. But I think he did like it at first."

He rose to go. He had said all that he intended to say, and perhaps a little more. But he was not quite sure if he had fully convinced Averil as to the finality of Peter's departure. She had been so silent, had said so little, had listened with so grave and absent-minded an air.

When he stood up it could be seen how admirably cut was that white suit he wore and it was evidently quite new and worn perhaps for the first time. Had Peter been there he would certainly have looked both poor and shabby in his rough, ill-cut clothes, which were yet so incapable of diminishing the splendor of his bearing. He would always look like a king among men, even if he were only garbed in rags! Averil sighed. It was hard that Justin should have so much and Peter so little.

"I want you both to come to luncheon to-morrow," said Justin, as he was about to take leave.

The princess glanced at Averil.

"Thanks — we shall be delighted," she said.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Justin had gone Averil escaped to her room. As a rule she remained in the garden until it was time to dress for dinner, especially on these hot summer evenings, when it was always

cooler out of doors at that hour. But her endurance was at an end, and each succeeding moment had rendered the task of self-control a more difficult one.

She wanted to be alone so that she might pray. The wish to pray had never occurred to her during that first hour of blank and hopeless misery. But now it had become very strong. Her mother had taught her to pray whenever she was unhappy, had implored her always to lay her grief before the Sacred Heart, that it might be sanctified even if it could not be removed. And she remembered that had been her first action after her mother's death, and it had brought consolation in that deep sorrow.

But the moment she knelt down the tears came. She had scarcely crossed herself when they began to flow, and she sobbed wildly and unrestrainedly. The sobs shook her violently from head to foot, as little by little all control left her. She was certain now that Peter had gone away forever — that he had never cared for her at all. He had simply gone away without a word. No man would go like that except by his own wish. It was absurd to try to console herself with the idea of plot and intrigue deliberately planned to separate them. If Peter had really wanted to see her again he would surely have contrived a meeting; he would never have thus supinely yielded to Justin's whim. And even supposing that Justin had deliberately got rid of him, he could at least have written one word. She broke down again.

The princess was feeling a little anxious about Averil. She had not been so completely deceived as Justin had been by the girl's stony composure when she had descended to the garden. It had struck her as forced and unreal, and the persistent silence had increased her anxiety. She went up to dress for dinner a little earlier than usual and halted for a sec-

ond outside Averil's door. To her dismay she heard from within a sound of passionate and unrestrained sobbing.

She hesitated. Dear as the girl was to her, intimate as they had become in the weeks they had spent together, she yet hardly dared to intrude upon her now in her grief. After all, she was not her mother, though she stood now in something of a mother's position to her, and it was as a daughter that she always thought of her. A mother, greatly darling because of the bond of a long mutual love, could have gone in and tenderly forced her daughter's confidence and used every effort to console and fortify that bruised heart. But for her to do this was a very different matter, and she was not sure that it did not require a greater courage than she possessed.

The link that bound her to Averil was a very slight one, and she judged it to be too new to bear any abnormal strain. And yet — and yet — she could not leave her like that.

With sudden courage she turned the handle of the door and entered the room.

Averil was still kneeling on her prie-dieu, and above her head on a small bracket there was a statue of the Sacred Heart with a red lamp burning before it.

Her fair hair had become disheveled and disordered when she had torn off her hat; one long lock, palely golden, hung over her shoulder. Her whole slight body was quivering violently under the stress of those fierce, ungovernable sobs.

"Averil — my darling child — don't cry like that," said the princess very gently as she advanced toward her and laid her hand softly on the girl's head.

Averil raised a swollen and tear-stained face that was now disfigured with crying. She dragged her-

self slowly to her feet and hid her face in her handkerchief.

The princess slipped her hand in hers and led her to the sofa.

"Come and sit down and tell me about it. Is it — are you crying on account of Mr. Clutton?"

"I am sorry," said Averil simply. "I tried not to cry. But when I knelt down and began to pray ——"

"You needn't be afraid to tell me about it. Your secret will be quite safe. But, Averil, dearest, if you are to live with me as my daughter you mustn't shut me out of your joys and griefs." She passed her hand soothingly over the beautiful, disordered hair.

"I — I did not want to shut you out. I have wanted you to know," said Averil with an effort.

"You know, dear, that I warned you. But, perhaps, I spoke too late for it to be of any use?"

Averil bowed her head. She was past speaking: the tears flowed afresh.

"But, my dear — you must understand this. From all that Mr. Mellor has told me, I don't think Mr. Clutton is in a position to marry. He has very little money and his sister is a heavy drag upon him. Under the circumstances it was more prudent of him to go away, even if he had ever thought of you as a girl he might wish to marry. But from things Mr. Mellor has told me I am afraid there was no thought of the kind in his head. I am sure he looked upon you as a pretty and charming child. You must try very hard to conquer this fancy, Averil. Many very young girls form romantic attachments of the kind — attachments that can never come to anything. It was unwise of me, perhaps, to let you see so much of each other, but I confess it was only latterly I began to think there might be something serious in it.

But I am sure he never said anything to you to lead you to imagine that there was any special feeling in his mind for you."

"No — he never said anything," said Averil slowly.

She was thinking of that interrupted sentence; she heard his voice saying "*Averil! Averil!*" She felt again the touch of his hand lying almost heavily upon hers, bringing with it a sense of mastery and conquest that thrilled her. But had there been anything in these things to show that Clutton cared for her, except perhaps, as the princess suggested, as a pretty and charming child?

"I want you to see, then, how foolish it would be to think of him any more. Foolish, and a waste of time and of emotion. A woman must learn to shield herself behind her pride." She drew Averil nearer to her and touched her forehead with her lips. "You were very good and brave this afternoon. You didn't quite deceive me, but you deceived Mr. Mellor, which was far more important. Go on being good and brave."

She rose and, filling a sponge, gently bathed the girl's eyes. Then she kissed her again in that tender, half-wistful fashion of hers. After all, the wound could not be so very deep. The whole affair had mercifully been of such short duration.

"But not here — I can't be brave here!" said Averil wildly. "I mean as long as I'm here everything reminds me — I can't forget. And I should always be hearing his name. Let me go away. To Florence — anywhere — away from here!"

She clung to the princess with almost hysterical violence.

"Dear Averil, if you wish to go away I will take you, but I must come with you. But it's hot weather for traveling, and Aspoli is cooler than most places

in August. I will think it over. I don't want you to stay here if it hurts you too much."

Averil's face was flushed; her gray eyes were feverishly brilliant; her little restless hands were hot and dry.

"It's impossible to stay here. I couldn't do it. You must let me go."

"Dear Averil, we mustn't do anything in a hurry. You must get a little calmer, and then we will talk it over."

She spoke soothingly.

"If you go on like this you will only make yourself ill. Don't you think you had better go to bed? I am sure you must feel exhausted and tired."

"I don't want to go to bed. I couldn't sleep."

But in the end she submitted, and allowed the princess to undress her, and comb and brush her long, fair hair and plait it up for the night. With her hair hanging down her back in one thick plait and dressed in her rather short but dainty little nightgown with a blue ribbon at her throat, Averil looked like a child. By the time these operations were complete she had grown much quieter. That long and passionate fit of crying had exhausted her and given her a little fever. Her head ached, and her eyes burned and smarted from the salt tears. She lay back on the pillow and closed her eyes. It was a relief to be in bed, for her limbs ached and she felt suddenly very tired.

"It is the sirocco that is making me feel so ill," she said in a weak voice.

"I shall have your dinner sent up to you," said the princess, "and than I hope you'll try to get some sleep. I am sure you will feel better in the morning."

The princess went alone to the Villa Annunziata

on the following day. Averil was still in bed, very feverish and restless. She looked so ill that at one time the princess had wondered if she ought to leave her. But, on the whole, she thought it would be better to go, and she could make the excuse of Averil's indisposition to return home soon after luncheon.

Justin was surprised to see her arrive alone, and for the moment he felt an odd pang of dismay.

"Why, where is Miss Waring?" he inquired, as he came forward to greet her.

"She's not at all well, and I've kept her in bed. You'll have to put up with my company to-day."

"Oh, I hope there isn't much the matter," said Justin, with a concerned look.

"She's got a touch of fever. I don't think it's much. It's the sirocco, and her head's bad. I've been trying to persuade myself all day that she can't be sickening for anything. But so many illnesses begin in this way, so of course one is anxious. What a horrible wind this is — it has burnt up all my flowers!"

She spoke with a kind of intentional carelessness. She did not want Justin to imagine that there was any other reason for Averil's indisposition.

Justin felt uncomfortable. He saw that she was anxious about Averil and her anxiety communicated itself to him. The consequences of his own action — if consequences they could rightfully be called — confronted him rather disagreeably at that moment. Why was Averil ill? Had she really been upset by the tidings of yesterday? The sirocco! Why, the idea was absurd! Averil had been accustomed to the sirocco all her life.

"I hope she isn't subject to fever," he said.

"I don't know — I forgot to ask her. But most people who habitually live in Italy get a touch from

time to time, especially when there's this burning sirocco and they're a little below par."

"But she's been looking so extraordinarily well," he protested; "and not at all below par."

The princess fanned herself. She was very hot, for she had walked across from the Villa Magnolia and the scorching wind had made her face tingle.

"Anyhow, I'm awfully sorry she couldn't come. There are things — changes I've made — that I wanted to show her. Clutton suggested some of them. You see, I think she's getting more or less reconciled now to my being here."

"Oh, yes; I am sure she is. It would have interested her to see what you have done."

Then he looked at her with attentive eyes.

"Did Miss Waring think it very odd of Clutton to bolt off home like that?"

"She never said so. I don't think I asked her."

Her voice was icy.

"We were quite wrong, you see, in supposing that there might be anything more than just mere friendliness on the part of either of them," he said, choosing his words carefully and scarcely hesitating at all.

"But we didn't suppose it, did we? We only wondered."

"Once or twice, if I had not known Peter so well, I might have been puzzled." He paused as he finished speaking and looked at her. "He must have seen for himself how young she was."

The princess said:

"I am sure he liked Averil and that she helped to make his holiday a pleasant one. What I couldn't understand was your telling us yesterday that he didn't like Aspoli — latterly at least."

"I gathered it from his great dislike to the thought of coming back here. I don't think he said

in so many words that he disliked it. There's luncheon. Won't you come in?"

There was a very beautiful luncheon, for Justin had taxed the utmost resources of Aspoli and of his own ménage in the preparation of it. His only regret was that Averil was not there to partake of it. Still he enjoyed the tête-à-tête meal with the princess; she was always agreeable and charming to talk to, and beautiful to look at. And there were things which he wanted to say to her, sooner or later. Perhaps, under all the circumstances, the sooner they were said, the better.

Justin ordered the coffee and liqueurs to be brought out into the loggia. It was cooler there, and the sea was visible and the dusky-blue shape of Ischia hung shadow-like between sea and sky. Although the atmosphere was still oppressive, it was not quite so hot this afternoon. Perhaps there had been a thunderstorm in the mountains to refresh the air with a little temporary coolness.

"I think I must be going back to my little girl," she said, as soon as she had finished her coffee. "I don't like to leave her too long."

"Oh, please don't go yet," said Justin. "I — I — there is something I want to say to you."

He colored crimson and looked for the moment quite shy and boyish. She stared at him in frank surprise. Was he going to tell her anything further about Clutton? Had he been the recipient of any confidence?

"It makes it so much more difficult for me to speak if I feel you are in a hurry to go away," he told her.

"Very well, then — I won't be in a hurry. But you mustn't be too long."

He said then abruptly:

"You told me once — not so very long ago —

that it was very unlikely Miss Waring would marry a man who wasn't of her own Faith. But if I told you that *I* wanted to marry her?"

He felt a little nervous when the words were uttered, and in the pause that followed he waited for her reply with a torturing anxiety. But she did not at first answer him. Her thoughts were uncomfortably occupied with the Averil of yesterday, the girl kneeling on her prie-dieu and sobbing in heart-broken fashion. If Justin could only have witnessed that stormy fit of passionate weeping or heard those piteous entreaties that she might leave Aspoli!

How deep Averil's wound had gone the princess could not possibly say, but for the present it was giving her the pain that only love can give. It was her first taste of that particular form of suffering, and one could not tell how long it would continue. But it was impossible to think that while it did continue there could be any hope at all for another man to win her.

Justin turned quite white. He felt that he knew what she was going to say.

"Is it quite hopeless?" he said, and he moved his hands a little nervously.

"I think it would be wise to wait a little before you speak to Averil. She is very young, and I am quite sure she has never thought of you in this way. When she is better I mean to take her away for a change. Perhaps, when we come back ——"

Until the image of Peter had become a little obliterated it would surely be useless for Justin to speak to her. But she could not tell him so, and she wondered a little if he had guessed anything.

"But you're not against it?" he said eagerly. He did not quite know why, but he had felt that she might be opposed to the idea.

"Oh, no; I'm not at all against it," she answered,

smiling. "In fact, I'm not sure that I don't think it would be quite the happiest thing that could happen to Averil. And I should keep her always near me, which, I'm afraid, is a selfish view to take of the case."

"It's a very sweet and charming view," he assured her.

"How strange it would be if she were really to return to her old home!" she said musingly.

"Yes — Clutton says it would satisfy the claims of poetic justice if I were to marry her. But I don't want her to marry me just for the sake of coming back here."

"I didn't quite mean that. But I'm sure it would be a point in your favor. Mr. Clutton must be in favor of it, too, if he said that. It shows, too, he could never have been thinking of her himself."

Justin did not answer. The princess rose.

"Averil is a strange child," she said. "Sometimes I feel that I know her very little. But I've grown very fond of her. Although I hope she will marry, I shall be sorry when the time comes for her to leave me." She waited a moment and then said:

"I am a little surprised that Mr. Clutton should have liked the idea — on religious grounds. He's so strict a Catholic."

"Oh, he's a bit of a bigot, certainly," said Justin lightly. "Still, you see, there would be something very appropriate about my marrying Miss Waring. I'm told it was rather what was expected of me when I came to the place."

"I never felt quite sure that Mr. Clutton wasn't beginning to fall in love with Averil," said the princess. "He certainly seemed to like her society very much."

"Oh, Peter never falls in love. But I'm sure, too, that he liked her — he said once he wished he

had a little sister just like her," said Justin easily.

The princess had learned now all that she wished to know. What she did not know, and could not possibly guess, was that Justin, without saying a word that was not strictly true, had managed to convey a perfectly false impression. She rose.

"Now I must really go back to my little girl. But not a word of this to her, Mr. Mellor. Believe me, you would only spoil your own chances. Be a little patient."

"Give her my *saluti*," he said.

He walked with her to the gate.

"I want your help," he said. "I'm afraid it won't be easy. Her mother wanted her to marry a Catholic. And she's too good not to be still greatly influenced by what Mrs. Waring wished. But if I have your approval and support——"

"Yes," she said; "you shall have all that. But you must take my advice. Averil's very young, and then you know each other so little. I'm quite certain she doesn't at present care for you in that way. Don't spoil everything for want of a little patience."

Musing upon this interview, she walked slowly home. It had all come as a great surprise to her, for Justin had given her no hint of what was passing in his mind. Had it been a sudden resolve, prompted, perhaps, by that conversation they had had on the subject of Averil's marriage? Or had it always been in his mind since the early days of his arrival in Aspoli? But Peter Clutton had affirmed that the claims of poetic justice would be satisfied by such a marriage, and those words more than anything showed the princess how hopeless Averil's love for him must necessarily be.

Later on, perhaps, when they had gone away from Aspoli for a change, she would tell Averil what Peter had said, so that she might know he was not thinking

of her at all. And that knowledge would pave the way for Justin; it would give him a chance of success.

CHAPTER XVII

THE princess formed her plans quickly. She determined to take Averil away the moment she was well enough to travel, and she judged that this would be in less than a week. Rome was to be their first destination and if they found it too hot there they could easily go from thence to some place of *villeggiatura* in the hills. There are many such places within an hour or two of Rome where from time immemorial the inhabitants of the Eternal City have sought refuge from the summer heats.

It was also part of her plan that Averil and Justin should not meet again before they left Aspoli. She was still afraid that Justin might, upon seeing the girl, reject her advice and precipitate a refusal that was at that time assured and inevitable and might even lead to disclosures.

She had weighed the pros and cons and she saw a great deal in favor of the proposed marriage. She longed to see Averil a happy wife, established in a home of her own with a devoted husband. And she liked Justin. She felt that she could give the girl confidently into his keeping, and she liked, too, to think that when Averil was married she would still live so near her. They would not be at all separated; she would see her nearly every day. And, as Clutton had said — a little cynically, perhaps, as it seemed to her when she thought it over — the claims of poetic justice would be satisfied. That speech must not be divulged to Averil until she was more capable of bearing it. At present she was feeling too wounded and too sore. But later on she might

need the bracing touch to pride and self-respect which it would almost certainly convey.

The princess made all her plans without consulting Averil about them. It was only as the day of their departure approached that she informed her of their impending journey. Averil was by that time able to leave her bed; the fever had subsided, and she lay on the sofa in the loggia outside her room during the cooler hours of the morning and evening.

Although she had ceased to speak of Peter, the princess felt sure that she was thinking of him constantly. Her face wore a hard, stony look. Miss Wilkinson, hearing of her illness, had sent word that she longed to bring Lupo to pay her a visit, and the suggestion seemed to evoke an immediate renewal of emotion.

"Oh, please not. I simply can't see her. Tell her I'm very, *very* sorry, but I don't feel well enough."

The princess sent back a very polite reply to this effect, and Miss Wilkinson wrote huffily to Mrs. Minchin, telling her of the repulse she had received.

"Things are going on very strangely here," she added, in her letter, "and if it were not that my thoughts are so continually occupied with Lupo, I should really feel very anxious about poor little Averil. She has had a most mysterious illness, and I can not find any one to describe her symptoms to me. I know that Mr. Mellor has not seen her, for I stopped him one day to ask him. His handsome young friend, Mr. Peter Clutton, the famous author, has gone back to London, so he is alone at the An-nunziata. He is building up the wall to such a height that it is impossible to see into the garden at all from the road. That is just like an Englishman — they are so afraid of being overlooked. But one has only to climb the hill and one can see right over

the wall, so he might just as well have saved himself all that trouble and expense. Lupo is feeling the hot weather a good deal and it makes his temper a little uneven, but I am very indulgent with him, as I am irritable myself in this sirocco weather, and Beppo does annoy him, although I am sure he does not mean to do so. He is not *simpatico* to dear Lupo."

A few days later she wrote again to Mrs. Minchin:

"My dear — things are becoming more mysterious than ever. Maria tells me that she saw the princess and Averil driving off to Naples in the car, with luggage piled on the top. So much luggage, she declares, that it must certainly be their intention to remain away a long time. I could not find out anything more about it until this morning, when I met Mr. Mellor on the lower road quite near the sea. He turned away and was walking in the opposite direction (like all Englishmen, he is certainly very shy, and, I feel, would do almost anything to avoid meeting one), but Lupo ran barking after him, so he could not possibly pretend that he hadn't seen or heard us. I ran up to him and said: 'Do you know that the princess has taken Averil away? Is she any better? What is all this mystery about her?' He looked at me quite oddly and said: 'There isn't any mystery that I know of. The princess has taken Miss Waring to Rome for a little change — she has not been well lately.' I could not get him to tell me any more, but I could not help wondering if they were really engaged at last, in which case they must have gone to Rome to get the trousseau. I do think Averil might have asked me to go and see her before she left. If she is well enough to travel she must be well enough to see her mother's old friend. I asked Lupo if he did not

think so, too, and he gave two short barks — that is his dear way of saying yes, you know."

In the days that followed their arrival in Rome the princess was very patient. She did not expect great things at first in the way of improvement, and she wisely left it to time to do his work. She hoped much, too, from the healing power of Rome. She remembered the old saying, "*When you have nothing left in life, go to Rome.*" There were always fresh things to be seen, some church to be visited, some hidden ruined fastness to be explored, some drive to be taken to obtain a wonderful view of the city itself or of the lovely Campagna that surrounded it.

To Averil all this was new, and insensibly it took her thoughts away from her sorrow. She revived, and the intense heat of the August days did her no harm.

It was a Rome which the English tourists never see, and from which even the English residents escape if they can. A parched, dry Rome, when the baked and bleached aspect of the city becomes intensified under that fierce sun which, day after day, pours its pitiless rays upon it. It is the Rome that is often scourged by the burning sirocco that sweeps through the city, making men's faces tingle as if they had approached too near to some fiery furnace. All through those burning days the oleanders bloom in the dusty piazzas, lifting clusters of fragile blossoms, rose-pink and deep red and starry white, to the blue sky. In the Borghese Gardens tired men and women and pallid children lie sleeping on the coarse grass under the shade of the great pines. And in the city the poor people creep close to the fountains, where the eternally falling water freshens the air like a cool and delicious breath. Especially beside the

great fountain of Trevi the Roman children gather to play, while their tired elders lie down under the scant shadow of the great stones and take an uneasy siesta. But at night a refreshing coolness sweeps in from the sea as if borne on delicate, healing winds, and thus Rome suffers less than the other great cities.

They had been in Rome for some weeks when the princess, going into Averil's room one day, found her deep in a book. She was so absorbed that she did not at first notice her approach. But when she looked up she seemed startled and thrust the book aside.

"What are you reading, dear?" said the princess gently.

Although it was now September, the heat had scarcely diminished at all and it was almost too hot to go out until evening.

"I am reading 'Richard Scarsdale,'" said Averil.

"'Richard Scarsdale' — Mr. Clutton's book?"

"Yes; I borrowed it from the library. You know I haven't read many novels — Mammina didn't like me to. But she would have loved 'Richard Scarsdale.' It must have been a great success — this one is marked 'Sixth Edition.'"

"I am very glad — he needs the money badly. Not so much for himself as for his poor sister."

Averil flushed a little, and her eyes grew very bright.

"Yes — I know; he has told me about her."

The princess paused for a moment looking at Averil. That slight touch of animation and excitement visible in her now accentuated her beauty. She looked younger, prettier and happier than she had done since the day she learned the news of Peter's abrupt departure.

"And you like his book?" she said, sitting down by Averil's side and taking her hand with a caressing gesture.

"Very—very much. Some of it is beautiful. It has made me feel, too, as if I knew him so much better. I suppose a man does put himself to a certain extent into his books. I keep telling myself these are his thoughts. Such beautiful, wonderful thoughts!"

The princess questioned the wisdom of this proceeding, but she made no comment.

"I wish I could tell him—I wish he could know—how much I've enjoyed reading it."

The princess had often suspected that Averil's love for Peter was very largely tinged by a kind of admiring hero-worship; it did not make it any the less real, but she thought that it might certainly make it more curable.

Still holding Averil's hand in her white fingers, she said:

"I have often thought that Mr. Clutton left Aspoli because he did not think it quite honorable to remain there. He is a poor man with an invalid sister dependent upon him, and at present certainly he is not in a position to marry. I thought he might have discovered that he was beginning to care for you, and also that he feared, at the same time, you might be beginning to care for him. Some men without any conceit at all are very quick to notice such things. But I learned before I left Aspoli that that never could have been the case. Mr. Mellor talked about you sometimes to Mr. Clutton and not a word led him to suppose that he had ever thought of you except as a very young girl—almost a child. He said, in fact, that he wished he had had a little sister just like you."

Averil gazed at the princess, drinking in the words.

"I am glad of that," she said. "I am glad he felt he would like to have had a little sister just like me. You see, I know he could never have cared for me. He is much too great — much too far above me. But it doesn't hurt me any more since I've read 'Richard Scarsdale.' I didn't realize before how great he was."

Yet even as she spoke, the remembrance of that last evening when they had been together in the garden at the Villa Magnolia flooded back overwhelmingly to her mind. "Averil — Averil —" and then the touch of his hand on hers. It had been such a wonderful moment, splendid, unexpected, and a little terrifying. But no one must know of it — not even the princess, who loved her and wanted to save her from pain. It must remain always a secret locked in her heart; one, also, that must not be looked at too often lest the remembrance should awaken sorrow.

"I am not going to be unhappy any more," she said suddenly. "I have felt these last weeks as if I were turning to stone. But now it shall never hurt me again. Did you think me very young and foolish?"

The princess drew her to her and kissed her.

"No. I didn't think you were foolish. It was very natural that you should like Mr. Clutton, and he was the first Englishman of your own Faith you had ever known. You started with that great sympathy between you. But it was only one of those pleasant, transient friendships which are agreeable at the time and are not at all permanent. I think as we get on in years we seldom make permanent friendships, but we form many more passing ones than

we do in youth. One has to get used to the idea — in practice it is a little painful at first. But it would be very, very foolish, Averil, to go on caring deeply for a man who has plainly shown that he does not care in that way for you. As I told you before, it is a waste of emotion which you will regret — when you marry. For some day I hope you will marry a good man who can give you a good home."

To her relief, Averil laughed.

"Oh, no one will ever want to marry me. I shall be an old maid like Miss Wilkinson and keep six small dogs and a parrot!"

She took up the book again.

"You ought to read it — it's a lovely book. I wish he had sent me a copy for my very own. It is strange of Mr. Mellor to refuse to read his friend's books. I wonder why it is?"

"You heard him say that he didn't like novels written with a purpose; especially religious novels," the princess reminded her.

Averil said dreamily, holding the book in her hands as if it were something very precious indeed:

"He's shown how brave and resigned the Catholic Faith can make a man. Oh, it is just what my darling mamma used to say! I am glad to think Mr. Clutton doesn't know how foolish and weak and — rebellious I have been since he went away. He would think my Faith was worth nothing at all. His book has helped me."

Her eyes were shining and her cheeks were a little flushed.

The princess thought that if Clutton could have seen her now, and heard her words, he would have been both touched and flattered, and perhaps a little ashamed.

For she could not regard him as entirely blameless, and there were moments, as she reflected upon

the affair, when her thoughts of him were tinged with a good deal of bitterness, and even anger. He had come and seen and conquered so easily, and then he had vanished suddenly and without a word. But if his written word could help Averil, so much the better. She began to think that this reading of "Richard Scarsdale" was a less unwise proceeding than she had at first imagined.

CHAPTER XVIII

AVERIL was walking along the Corso. Outside Aragno's a number of men were sitting at the little brown-painted iron tables. Most of them were drinking iced beer or syrup or eating the *granite* (the frozen coffee covered with whipped cream) beloved of the Romans. It was about half past twelve o'clock and the sun was shining fiercely, although September was now well advanced. The "*Piccolo*" had just made its appearance and even in those pre-war days copies had been eagerly bought. Indeed, it seemed as if almost every man there had bought a copy and was now engaged in reading the latest morning telegrams from all over the world. But many of the dark-eyed officers looked up from the flimsy sheet to watch Averil as she passed, and had she been near enough she might have overheard a muttered "*carina*." She held herself well, and despite her slight and girlish figure she had the dignity of a little queen. She was dressed in white from her hat to her little shoes, and the sunshine brought out all the golden lights of her pale hair. She made a pretty picture of English girlhood as she passed along the Corso on her way back to the hotel near the Piazza di Spagna, where she and the princess were staying. She had just passed Aragno's and

crossed the Via delle Convertite when a man stepped out from under the shade of the deep orange-colored awnings, and she came suddenly face to face with Justin Mellor. In another moment he was shaking her hand eagerly and effusively. People turned their heads to look at the meeting between these two *forestieri*. Perhaps even some of them discerned a little romance.

He seemed extraordinarily pleased to see her, so much so that the very warmth of his greeting evoked a certain response in Averil. And she suddenly became aware of her pleasure in seeing some one who had come from her beloved Aspoli. She had been away long enough now to feel a little twinge of nostalgia, that was deepened by this sudden sight of Justin.

Perhaps, too, she hoped that he might give her news of Peter. The shame and pain of that episode had passed away; it seemed to belong to a remote epoch of her childhood. She was no longer afraid to hear his name mentioned. Two months had gone by since his precipitate return to London and she believed herself to be wholly cured. She flushed up to her forehead with surprise, and Justin, mistaking the flush, became inwardly exultant.

"I only arrived this morning," he said, "and I meant to come and call upon you and the princess this afternoon. But it's the best of good luck to meet you like this. I hope the princess is well. I have missed you both more than I can say."

"She is quite well, thank you," said Averil, walking on slowly with Justin by her side. "Are you going to make a long stay in Rome? It is still very hot here, but people say that the rain is sure to come soon."

"It depends rather on circumstances how long I shall remain," said Justin evasively. "I find Rome

a bit too hot — it's much hotter than Aspoli. I think I shall spend next summer in the mountains."

He glanced approvingly at Averil. She was looking extremely pretty to-day; she was carefully and daintily dressed, as if all the details of her toilette had been most carefully thought out. He detested any display of shabbiness in women, and he was conscious of a certain pride as he walked along the crowded Corso by her side. He felt that other men must be looking at him and perhaps envying him because he was with Averil.

He had been silent and prudent now for nearly two months and he had suddenly felt an acute desire to put an end to that period of probation insisted upon by the princess. He wanted to marry Averil as soon as possible. He loved her, and at that moment he could assure himself quite sincerely that he was very deeply in love with her. It had been dreadfully lonely during these past weeks at the Villa Annunziata, and all the time he had been making mental pictures of the day when Averil should return to her old home as his beloved wife. He liked to think of her wandering in and out of the old rooms, and stealing through the garden in the summer dusk, and walking by his side on the terrace overlooking the sea. He felt he had always wanted this ever since he had first found her hiding from him in the orange-orchard — a strange, hostile, vehement little figure! He had been so lonely that sometimes he had actually invited Miss Wilkinson to come and have tea with him because he felt the urgent necessity of speaking his own language and, above all, of talking about Averil. And he found Miss Wilkinson was always quite ready to talk about the Warings in the intervals between her recitations of Lupo's delinquencies and the perpetual chastisements she was unhappily obliged to give him.

She told him a great deal about Mrs. Waring, her sufferings and her death; of Averil's patient and devoted care of her mother; of the girl's grief when death stepped in and took that beloved companion. She drew a picture of Averil as a little girl with fair, flowing hair; she supplied him, indeed, with many intimate details of her childhood which otherwise he might never have known. It made him listen with extraordinary patience to the inevitable recital of Lupo's merits and demerits — a subject which interested him not at all.

His evident anxiety to see the princess encouraged Averil to invite him to come to tea with them that afternoon, an invitation which he promptly accepted. He left her at the door of the hotel where she was staying, promising to return at five o'clock.

In the *salotto* on the second floor which formed part of their suite of rooms she found the princess.

"I met some one to-day in the Corso. But you must guess who it was," she said eagerly.

The princess had a moment's fear that she must have met Clutton, for there was a restrained excitement about Averil which she could not help perceiving. But before she could guess Averil interposed:

"It was Mr. Mellor. I was so surprised to see him — I had no idea he meant to come to Rome. I have asked him to tea — he wants to see you so much!"

The princess was astonished. She had had no news of Justin for several weeks, and she wondered a little why he had not at least announced his coming, that is, if he had really come for the purpose she imagined. This independent action of his taught her that he had only followed her advice as long as he deemed it absolutely necessary, and that his sudden appearance in Rome could only signify that he had come to put his fate to the ultimate test.

Had he come too soon?

She was just a little sorry, and she looked for a moment wistfully at Averil. It was hard to judge for another person, so difficult to foretell whether a certain step would prove wise or happy. Especially the all-important step of marriage — and then Averil was still so young. She looked less than her twenty years, and though she had seemed older and more serious since the events of the summer, she was still in many ways very much of a child in her simple outlook. She would have liked her to wait a year or two longer.

But Justin was, so to speak, on the threshold, an ardent and determined lover. Of that there could really be no doubt; his very coming to Rome had betrayed his purpose. She had held him back for two months, and she felt that it was hardly long enough. If he could only have brought himself to wait for six months he would have had a far better chance of success.

And Averil? Would she listen to him now? Would she be prepared to accept a man, devoted to herself, who could yet awaken within her none of that passionate intensity of feeling that Peter Clutton's least word had been able to evoke?

She wondered now if it would be well to prepare her. At least it could do no harm; it might even avert the point-blank refusal which she feared Justin's offer might receive.

As for the religious question, that affected the princess very little, offering scarcely any pretext for serious misgiving. It was not as if their home were to be in England where it might create difficulties. Here in Italy Justin need never feel the drawback of having a wife of a different and more exigent faith. Later on he might object to his children being educated at Catholic schools, but surely if he

were ready to make the necessary promises, he would keep them as a matter of common honor. Although she was not a Catholic herself, she felt that it was part of her duty toward Averil to see that her religion was duly safeguarded when she married.

After luncheon they were sitting together when she said suddenly:

"Come here, Averil."

She made room on the sofa by her side, and Averil came and sat there close to her, wondering a little what she had to say. But she slipped her hand into hers with a spontaneous gesture of confidence and sympathy. "What is it?" she asked.

"Have you wondered at all why Mr. Mellor has come to Rome?" asked the princess gravely.

Averil shook her head. That his visit should in any way concern herself had never entered her head.

"No — he gave no reason. He only said it depended on circumstances how long he decided to stay here."

She waited a moment, fighting against a curious and sudden presentiment of impending misfortune.

"Do *you* know of any reason?" she faltered.

"I do not actually know, but I think I can guess. Before we left Aspoli Mr. Mellor took me into his confidence."

Averil had a strange sinking of the heart. She felt herself growing a little cold.

"He took you into his confidence?" she repeated, and now her voice trembled a little.

"Yes. He told me that he was in love with you — that he wished to make you his wife."

As she uttered these words she let her long, violet eyes rest on the girl's face. Averil sat there pale and motionless. She looked as if she had not quite understood.

"I asked him not to speak to you then. I knew

you were not ready to listen to another man's love-making. I made no allusion to your secret, Averil — he knew nothing about that — but I pleaded that you were very young, and I begged him to wait. I suppose, as he has come to Rome, he has decided not to wait any longer."

Averil was very silent; she trembled and swayed a little as if she were held by some powerful emotion.

"Now, I don't want you to settle anything in a hurry," continued the princess. "Remember, it is a question of your whole life. You have had your dreams, Averil — the dreams that all young girls have. But those dreams don't always — don't often even — end in marriage. Don't throw away a good man's love for the sake of a dream that did not — that could not — come to anything."

Averil shrank a little away from her.

"Do you mean," she said in a frightened tone, "that you *want* me to marry Mr. Mellor?"

It seemed as if she could scarcely believe the evidence of her own hearing.

"I don't wish you to marry him unless you feel that you can care for him as a wife should. But I do urge you very much not to give him a definite refusal when he asks you to be his wife. Wait a little and think it over very carefully. He is sincerely devoted to you; he wants to take you back to the home of your childhood. I am sure that you would learn to be very happy with him. And I should keep you near me always. I should not lose you, Averil."

Averil was again silent, but the white, puzzled, frightened look deepened in her face and made her look suddenly much older. She felt inwardly as if she had come quite suddenly and unexpectedly to a steep and dark precipice, toward which kindly and friendly hands were resistlessly thrusting her.

She had laughed lightheartedly once at the suggestion when Miss Wilkinson had assured her they were all waiting to hear of her engagement; it had seemed such an impossible thing that she could afford to laugh at the bare idea. But now that the idea was actually taking shape and form, materializing, as it were, before her eyes, she did not laugh but shrank back in fear and trembling.

"Oh," she said suddenly, "don't please speak of it like that — as if it were something that could really happen. Don't — *don't!*"

"Why — what do you mean, Averil?"

"I mean — I could never care for Mr. Mellor," she said. "I don't even like him, and I don't trust him." She waited a moment, as if trying to frame her thoughts in adequate words. "When I told you I knew I had been foolish about Mr. Clutton, in letting myself care for him, and in being unhappy about him when he went away, I only meant you to know that I wasn't going to let myself be unhappy any more. But it didn't mean that I could think of — or marry — any one else."

The princess smoothed back the fair hair with her hand.

"I think it would make Mr. Clutton very happy to know that you were going to marry his great friend. They spoke of it together, Averil. And he told Mr. Mellor once that the claims of poetic justice would be satisfied if he married you and took you back to your own old home."

Now her face was no longer white; the blood mounted to her forehead, staining that whiteness of hers. Instinctively the girl put her hands to her heart. A physical pain as of a burning sword seemed to pierce her; she could have cried out with agony.

If Clutton had ever cared for her in the least he

could never, never have made such a speech as that. He could never even have calmly discussed her marriage to another man, even though that man were his intimate friend, any more than she herself could have calmly discussed his marriage to another woman.

Oh, he had made light of her youth and inexperience when he had laid his hand on hers and said, "*Averil — Averil,*" in a tone that had seemed to betray a passionate emotion. And she had waited patiently, almost humbly, for his return; she had made herself believe that he would come back and finish that interrupted sentence.

"He said that? He said that of me — to Mr. Mellor?"

The words stirred within her a passionate resentment against Peter. For the moment she almost felt as if she hated him. He had played with her as if she had been a child; perhaps he had even observed and tried to deepen the love that she had endeavored so hard to conceal. There was shame in the thought; there was the subtle degradation of giving her love unsought. Young as she was, Averil could understand this, and it produced within her a violent revulsion of feeling against Peter Clutton. He had cared so little that he could cynically say the claims of poetic justice would be satisfied if she were to return to the Villa Annunziata as Mr. Mellor's wife. It was, on the face of it, such a monstrous statement that she found some difficulty in believing it. Only she must not delude herself any more. There had been enough of that in the past. She must put away her dreams — her beautiful dreams.

"I have told you that, not because I wanted to hurt you, but to show you how mistaken you were in attaching any importance to Mr. Clutton's atten-

tions. You see, in England a good deal of liberty is allowed, much more than in Italy. Young men and girls meet there and associate in all kinds of sports and other interests without there being any question of love. I am sure it never occurred to him that you would attach any importance to his meeting you — to his pleasure in your companionship."

"I felt that he cared for me," said Averil in a low, strangled voice, for the lump that had risen to her throat was giving her sharp pain. "I had no reason — oh, none at all — but I felt it. Love seemed to be between us like some warm and clear atmosphere in which all our thoughts were visible to each other. I shall never have that feeling about any one again. I shall never have it for Mr. Mel-lor. I am afraid of him. He has sharp eyes and he says sharp things when he isn't thinking. And then he isn't a Catholic. I have done many things since Mammina died which she wouldn't have liked me to do, but I couldn't go against her in this!"

The princess listened without interrupting to this speech, which was a much longer one than the majority of Averil's speeches. It gave her a fresh and novel insight into that young heart. Those words, touched with imagination and emotion, "Love seemed to be between us like some warm and clear atmosphere in which all our thoughts were visible to each other," struck a chord of memory that vibrated with a curious anguish like the sudden pang of an ancient, almost forgotten wound. She had known precisely that passionate sympathy which is the immediate result of a great love, which bestows a strange power of clairvoyance, which surrounds and isolates with a warm and clear atmosphere. And it was that very love which had brought into her own life violence and disaster and tragedy. It was a

question, indeed, whether it could ever bring a tranquil and ordered happiness — the kind of happiness she wished Averil to have. But she made no comment on the first part of the speech, saying only:

"Why, what have you done, dear Averil, that would have been against Mrs. Waring's wishes?"

Averil was surprised into frankness.

"My coming to live with you. Assunta and Mrs. Minchin and Miss Wilkinson all told me the same thing, all said how much she would have been against it. But I always felt that if she could only know how kind you had been to me — how you have taken away that lonely feeling that hurt me so — that she would understand and forgive, and thank you if she could. But if I married a Protestant, I could never, never feel that she had forgiven me."

"Averil, darling, we have to live our own lives; we have to make the best we can of them. I don't want to persuade you to do anything wrong — anything even that is against your conscience. But if you do marry Mr. Mellor, I shall see that he makes all the necessary promises both on your account and in regard to any children that you might have."

But Averil seemed to shrink away from her. Her eyes were piteous and entreating.

"Oh, couldn't you tell him not to ask me to marry him? Couldn't you tell him to go back to Aspoli without seeing me again?"

"No, I don't think I can do that, Averil. He has been very patient and good about it for more than two months, and I can't keep him away any longer. You must hear what he has to say. You may feel quite differently when you hear him plead his own cause." She kissed the girl kindly. "Remember, you are perfectly free to do exactly as you choose. I shall be glad to keep my little girl for a few years longer if she doesn't want to leave me yet. And, on

the other hand, I should be glad to think she had a home of her own and a devoted husband to care for her, one who will love her even more than I do. But I'm not immortal, Averil, and if I were to die, you would be alone again. I shouldn't like to leave you quite alone. The world is rather a hard place for solitary women — you would not always meet with kindness and sympathy. Often, too, it is the happy and sheltered women who are most cold and unkind to their solitary, uncared-for sisters. I had a very dear and intimate friend when I lived in Russia. When the disaster — of my life — happened she was the first to shut her door upon me, to say she never wished to see me again. No — I shouldn't like to leave you quite alone, Averil."

At these words, so full of delicate tenderness and solicitude, Averil burst into sudden weeping and flung her arms round the princess' neck.

"Oh, I don't want ever to leave you," she sobbed. "I've been so very, very happy with you. I should like to stay with you always."

The princess smiled.

"Oh, that would never do, Averil. You must have a home of your own. Only the lover has come a little soon, hasn't he? Sooner than we hoped or expected."

She rose and Averil rose, too.

"Won't you go to your own room and rest a little? And, Averil — I should like you to put on your new blue muslin when Mr. Mellor comes."

CHAPTER XIX

IT seemed a very strange thing to Averil to think that she was going so soon to receive her first offer of marriage. Such a thing had never happened to

her before; indeed, it was really only in the last few months that she had ceased to feel like a child. Until her mother's death she had been sheltered and cared for just as she had been when she was a little girl; scarcely anything in her daily life had changed at all. Mrs. Waring, perhaps, had been the last to see that her child was growing up, for the simple rules she had laid down for Averil's guidance and conduct had never been altered. When her mother died there had been that first dreadful feeling of complete liberty, complete freedom, which she had tried to mitigate by following closely the old rules that she had always faithfully kept. Now she knew she could not escape from that freedom, and there were decisions which she would have to make for herself with only the counsels of Padre Lorenzo to tell her if certain things were right or wrong for her as a Catholic to do.

She wondered what she ought to say to Justin. Averil had not perhaps quite the same view of marriage as an English girl brought up in England invariably has. She lived in a country where marriages were almost always arranged by the parents, and where natural predilection did not often count for much. It was usually, perhaps, more a matter of obedience than consent on the girl's part. She bowed to the superior wisdom of her parents, and the all-important choice lay far more in their hands than in her own. It was for this reason that Averil had been much more influenced by the princess' words on the subject of Justin and of the suitability of the marriage than if she had been brought up in England according to English notions. She did not, therefore, at once repudiate the prospect of marrying Justin, although she was greatly concerned as to whether it could possibly be right for her to promise to marry a Protestant.

Her thoughts were very full of these things as she went into her own room and shut the door. The *persiennes* had been drawn across the window to keep out the sunshine, so the room was almost dark when she entered it, as Italian rooms almost always are during the hot hours of the daytime. She unfastened them and sat down near the window. There was not much view to be seen except of the old tiled Roman roofs, that seem to gather so many beautiful tones and shades of color with the passing of time. But overhead there was the wonderful wide sky, with thousands of swifts circling round in restless, perpetual, and, as it seemed, purposeless flight.

The knowledge that Justin was in love with her, wished to marry her in all her childishness and ignorance, filled her with surprise. She had always felt that he looked down upon her from his superior intellectual altitude; there had always been a little touch of contempt in his manner toward her, at any rate until Peter Clutton came upon the scene. This morning, however, he had seemed quite different, and she saw now the reason for his eagerly expressed pleasure, his apparent delight at meeting her. It had not come to her as a pleasant surprise, and, now she knew for certain that he wanted to marry her, her old alarm and mistrust of him were curiously intensified. And suddenly she became aware that if Peter Clutton had been on his way this afternoon to ask her to marry him, she would not now be enduring this feeling of fear and suspense and dread; she would be waiting for him in an ecstasy of joy, trembling with excitement and happiness, and afraid only to go forward and meet so stupendous a happiness lest it should somehow melt away.

But that was a girl's dream, the princess had told her, a dream, moreover, that could never be real-

ized. Once she had yielded herself to it and she had been very roughly awakened. She knew for certain now that Peter had never cared for her at all. He had actually approved of the project of a marriage between herself and Justin. It cost her a good deal to give up her faith in Peter, but there had been something decisive and final about those words of his duly repeated to her; she felt obliged to accept them.

Those words were influencing her very powerfully at the moment, as perhaps the princess had intended that they should. They served to complete her disillusionment. As far as Peter was concerned, they killed her faith as well as her hope, and only love remained, a wounded, tortured thing that refused to die. Averil deliberately performed the process known as hardening one's heart. She hardened her heart against Peter. But she saw that an immense effort would be required to make the process at all permanent.

In the heat of her anger and of her despised love, in the renewed sense of shame she felt at having given that love unasked, it came into her mind that she would show Peter by a practical method that if he had ever imagined she had cared for him at all, he had been wholly and entirely mistaken. She would marry Justin if Padre Lorenzo gave her the required permission. Not because she loved him — there was, indeed, something about him that she actually feared — but because she wished to show Peter that she had never loved him and that he had been wrong in supposing she did.

From the chaos of her thoughts she evolved this plan, but she shrank from the task of carrying it out. It offered immense difficulties, and on the face of it it involved a deliberate burning of all her boats. If she married Justin it would not only be foolish but

actually sinful to think of Peter again in the tender and loving way she had thought of him during the past months.

She took out the blue muslin dress and put it on. It was the color of pale, fading, blue hydrangeas, and it was quite new; she had never worn it. The princess had bought it for her only last week, as she often did buy things that she admired in a shop window if she considered they would suit Averil. And this dress suited her pale, fair coloring very perfectly. She was just ready when the maid came to tell her that tea had been taken into the *salotto* and that the princess was expecting her.

She hesitated for a moment and then, holding her head very high, she went down the passage into the *salotto*, which was the last room of their suite. Her white, stony face was set as if with some dreadful purpose, and it had definitely just then lost all trace of childishness, almost of youth.

In the rather dark room she could see Justin sitting in one of the chintz-covered arm-chairs near the tea-table.

The hangings of the room were of deep red, and the walls were hung with dull-colored silk of some dark and indefinite hue, and in this somber setting Averil's brilliant and arresting fairness was seen to its fullest advantage. She was beautiful and mysterious-looking, and at sight of her Justin's heart gave a great throb. He longed then and there to take her in his arms and kiss her.

When tea was over the princess rose and went out of the room, leaving them alone. She smiled kindly and encouragingly to Averil as she passed her.

Justin was painfully nervous when he found himself alone with Averil. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come. He could

not remember one of the tender and beautiful speeches he had intended to make. And Averil, in her motionlessness, her cold and detached silence, gave him no help at all.

She was thinking how very much she disliked the color of his hair. It was so very brilliant, and seemed the more conspicuous because he wore it so long, and brushed back off his face in that ridiculous, womanish fashion. She wondered if the princess really knew best when she affirmed that she was sure he would make her happy. If she had never known Peter, if she had never learned through him what love might mean, she felt that it would have been almost easy for her to marry Justin because the princess wished it so much and was so convinced that such a marriage would bring happiness to her.

But Averil knew quite well with that suddenly awakened wisdom of hers that Justin could never bring her one-millionth part of the joy nor of the tormenting misery that Peter had brought to her heart. Why, there were absurd little things about Peter — ways he had of jerking back his head, or sticking out his chin, or glancing down with a curious, whimsical tenderness — tricks, too, of lifting his eyebrows with an expression of wondering surprise — that could thrill one through and through with sheer joy at his mere presence. And when he had once, just for one little moment, looked at her gravely and steadily with something she had been quick to mistake for love in his dark eyes; when he had put his hand on hers by the fountain and said, "*Averil — Averil*" in a voice almost broken with emotion, she had come near to fainting at his feet because her heart seemed incapable of holding so immense a happiness.

That hardening process so deliberately undertaken had not been so very successful after all. Just one

thought — one little remembrance — had sufficed to flood her heart with tenderness toward him.

And all this time Justin was looking at her with his light and piercing eyes, wondering a little what was in her mind.

"Miss Waring — Averil — I think you know why I've come to-day. But what you don't know — what you could never know — is how much I love you."

Twice in saying the words he stammered. His usual assurance had dropped from him. All passions, says La Rochefoucauld, make us commit follies, but love makes us commit the most absurd ones. Justin had the dreadful feeling that he was cutting a ridiculous figure in Averil's eyes. It would almost have relieved him if he could have known how little she was thinking about him at all.

But to him her attitude seemed only cold and critical. He almost wished he had waited longer. The princess had told him that she feared his visit was premature, that he would have done better to wait another six months.

"Until to-day," she said at last in her clear tones, "I hadn't any idea that you even liked me. It seems all very strange — very unreal."

She looked at him with a kind of remote look, as if she were contemplating a stranger whose mission she regarded with suspicion.

"I daresay the idea seems new to you. But it isn't at all new to me. I feel as if it had begun when I first saw you that evening in the orange-orchard. But since you went away from Aspoli I have thought of nothing else. I have longed to come, but I did not dare."

He had overcome his nervousness and there was a certain restrained passion in his voice that renewed her fear of him.

"If you think it over," he continued, "perhaps the idea will begin to seem less strange. Oh, I know you can't care for me as I care for you, but I would spend my life in making you happy. I love you, Averil, and if you consent to be my wife I will teach you to love me, too." He came a step toward her; she shrank a little away from him and her eyes were bright with sudden fear.

Oh, it would be impossible to give him what he asked — the right to love her and hold her happiness in his hands! The princess could never have thought of these things, or she could not have counseled her to marry him. That dreadful wish of showing Peter that she had never cared for him faded a little before her fear of Justin.

"Can't you give me any hope, Averil?" he said, and now there was a note of humble entreaty in his voice. "What are you going to say to me?"

"I can't give you any answer now," said Averil desperately. "I must have time to think it over. And I want you to understand one thing, please — I am only saying this now because the princess urged me not to do anything in a hurry. Otherwise I should have told you now — at once — that I don't care for you. I can't marry you — I seem scarcely to know you at all."

She saw that his face grew a shade paler as he listened to these words.

It seemed indeed terrible to Justin that he owed even this most unpromising demand for delay to the princess. And there was no mistaking the decision in Averil's tone. There was something grave and assured in her manner which removed the last vestige of childishness and gave her a woman's dignity and grace that increased her attraction a thousandfold.

"And then — afterward — if I ask you to go

away and forget me because it is impossible for me to marry you — you will go?" she said.

"I will go," he said, but his face flinched as if he had been dealt a sudden blow. "About forgetting you, Averil — no, not in this world nor the next!" He paused, looking at her. "You are a hundred times more beautiful now than you were when I first saw you. You were almost like a child then — a pretty, petulant child! But now I think you are the loveliest woman I have ever seen."

Averil listened with a curious air of attention. It was the first time any man had told her that she was beautiful, and she wondered if it could possibly be true. She was so little vain that she thought it must be due to her pretty new frock that he had received so false an impression of her.

"You have it in your hands to make or ruin my life," he told her.

This evoked a protest. It was certainly an exaggeration to attribute any responsibility in the matter to her.

"Oh, how can you say such a thing? Why, I think I could count the number of times we have seen and spoken to each other!"

He answered rashly:

"Do you suppose love has anything to do with that? Sometimes once is enough — just one chance meeting — to decide the destiny of a man and woman."

The color rushed to her face. Yes, that was undoubtedly quite true. She recalled with a sharp touch of pain that first evening when he had brought Peter to dinner at the Villa Magnolia, even that first time when her eyes had met Peter's from the boat on the afternoon of his arrival at Aspoli. She began to wonder if Justin felt for her what she had

felt for Peter, and she shrank a little from the thought. Oh, why was not love an equal, mutual, reciprocal thing that gave in the precise measure it received? Love must surely sometimes be felt in like measure by two people in the same way, so that they only desired to be together, isolated and apart from the rest of the world.

She was beginning to wish that he would go away. The prolonged scene was getting on her nerves. And his words, his presence, reminded her of Peter. The old pain had come back, slowly taking possession of her heart, bringing with it torment and shame.

"I don't even ask," he said, "that you should care for me as I care for you. You are still young and — unawakened. But I am sure that in time I could teach you — Averil."

And again he came a step toward her; he was so close to her that if she had moved at all she must have touched him. He put out his hand as if he would have taken hers. Her eyes watched him, full of terror. He must not touch her hand — he must not — he must not! Something that was even more powerful than the physical shrinking from his touch made her clasp her hands closely together as if to avert that contact.

Justin drew back a little.

"I will be patient," he said, "but do not forget that already I have been waiting for many weeks."

She longed to beg him to go away.

"The Villa has seemed silent and very dreary. I keep thinking of the day when you will come back there. Oh, I want it to be yours as well as mine! Our life there could be so beautiful, Averil. My very coming there has seemed like a definite part of my destiny."

The remembrance of her old home held her then — the dear familiarity of that old, spacious, shabby Italian house; of the garden, beautiful in its very wildness and confusion, with its secret shady paths, its glorious glimpses of blue sea and bluer sky. Would these things, once so passionately missed and mourned, count with her now? They were all hers for the taking if she chose to pay the price.

"You have not given me much hope," he said at last. "Yet I suppose I shall be fool enough to go on hoping. When may I see you again?"

"I don't know," she answered. She felt it would be a very long time before she would consent to another interview with him. "Perhaps the princess will write and ask you to come."

"You know that the princess approves — that she wishes for our marriage? She likes to think that if you married me you would still continue to live near her."

"Yes, I know," assented Averil coldly.

Those things had had much greater weight with her when she was meditating upon the matter alone; the actual physical presence of Justin diminished their influence over her.

"She told me, too, that you might have scruples about marrying a man who wasn't a Catholic. I know that there are certain promises I should have to make. I have assured the princess I am perfectly ready to make them. More than that, Averil, I think you might in time teach me to believe as you believe."

It was one of the cleverest things he could possibly have said, yet he had uttered the words with simple impulsiveness and almost unwittingly. He added:

"I see what it's done for you and Clutton."

It was the first time Clutton's name had been mentioned, but Averil had schooled herself for the ordeal and she was able to hear it without emotion.

"Perhaps I had better go now," said Justin. "You must forgive me if I have stayed too long."

"Good-by," said Averil, putting out her hand.

He closed his fingers lightly over it for a moment and then turned and left her. The sound of his retreating footsteps seemed to fill the room as he went out, and yet he trod with light, brisk tread. It was with a sense of infinite relief that she heard the door close behind him.

She waited a moment, deliberating, and then went into the princess' bedroom. She found her lying on the sofa, reading. But she put down the book as Averil approached, and said:

"Well, Averil, darling? What have you come to tell me?"

Justin had certainly stayed a very long time — much longer than she had expected — and she wondered a little if a definite conclusion had been arrived at.

"Nothing is settled," said Averil in a clear, hard voice. "I have asked him to wait a little before I give him an answer. I did that to please you, and he knows it is for that reason, and because you urged me not to do anything in a hurry."

She came up to the sofa and, kneeling down suddenly, flung her arms round the princess. The girl's heart was aching for human sympathy. "Oh, don't you see," she said, "that if you'd been against it, how much easier it would have been for me? Why weren't you against it?"

"Dear Averil — I only want your happiness. And happiness depends on many things for its sustenance — many very commonplace and matter-of-

fact things that haven't anything to do with love at all. But I don't want you to marry any one you dislike or fear. If you have those feelings for Mr. Mellor it would be far better for you to refuse him altogether. But be very sure of yourself before you give him any answer at all. Think it over very seriously. I am not against it; indeed, as you know, if anything, I am in favor of it. I think and believe that in many ways it would be a most fortunate thing for you. But don't decide anything in a hurry, my dear Averil. Marriage is a very irrevocable thing — to one of your religion it is quite irrevocable — and no woman, whatever her religion, can break its bonds without paying very dearly." But she put her arm round Averil and, drawing her face to hers, kissed her. "I do want my little girl to be happy."

As Averil went along the passage back to her own room she said softly to herself, but with a bitterness that hurt and stung:

"At any rate, the claims of poetic justice would be satisfied."

These words influenced her very strongly. They made her a little reckless, a little indifferent. She found herself meditating continually upon them during the days that followed, and there is no doubt that more than anything they influenced her final decision. After three or four days she voluntarily wrote a little note to Justin, telling him that she would marry him, and, curiously enough, when the note was written her first feeling was one almost of relief. She had with her own hands raised a definite barrier between herself and Peter. It had been of her own doing, and she realized what an irrevocable barrier it would prove. And if she could not be happy herself, she reflected, she might at least try to make another person happy, even if she disliked above all things the color of his hair.

CHAPTER XX

PETER CLUTTON was alone in his den in the little flat he shared with his sister just off the Kensington High Street. It was an evening toward the middle of September, and he had already been back for nearly a fortnight from his annual "camp" with the members of the Boys' Club. They had enjoyed it all enormously — the early parades, the drill, the sea-bathing, the delight of cooking their own simple food, the glorious summer nights spent under canvas. Yes, it had been an immense success, and if Peter himself had enjoyed it less than usual it had never been apparent to the boys. But the weather had been very hot, and Peter had felt a little tired; he had been working too hard this year, he told himself. And that sedentary life he led was not the best equipment for those weeks of strenuous physical exercise. He was glad to be back in London, although his little abode seemed more than usually confined and stuffy. In his heart he knew he was longing for the shade of an ilex-grove open to all the sweet airs from the sea and fragrant with the scent of blossom.

He had just come in, and on the table he found a neat little pile of letters awaiting his attention. There was one from his publisher and he opened that first. A check dropped out for the first six months' royalties of "Richard Scarsdale." It represented such a sum as Peter had never dreamed of possessing, and the letter announced the preparation of yet another large edition of the book. He must wait until to-morrow before he told Monica; it would excite her too much to hear about it to-night; almost certainly it would prevent her from sleeping. Two other envelopes with the addresses typewritten

promised to be less interesting, and he opened the first that came quite carelessly.

As he read it the blood mounted to his forehead. The letter was from a very well-known, old-established firm of publishers, and it intimated that, owing to the very great success achieved by his novel "Richard Scarsdale," which had won the praise of many eminent critics, their firm had decided to write and make him an offer for his next three books. The offer was one which simply "staggered" Peter. He had no idea that people ever really received sums like that for their books; he always considered that the incomes which celebrated and popular authors were supposed to make were invariably greatly exaggerated. And it was a subject on which most authors were completely silent; as a race they seemed almost superstitious of speaking of their gains lest these should suddenly melt away like fairy gold.

As he read it almost seemed to him as if the writer of that letter had been bent upon playing some practical joke upon him. He turned to the remaining letter and found, to his astonishment, that it was from another firm of equally exalted position, offering him terms that were still more substantial for his three next novels.

Well, success had come at last; success measured by the somewhat sordid test of money! A number of projects for the future passed nebulously through his mind. He could take a house in the country near the sea (Monica loved being near the sea), and when it was ready he could move her thither in a motor-ambulance. There would be no need to spare expense. She should have a properly trained attendant to wait upon her; he had long dreamed of giving her that. And — the thought had been teasing him subconsciously ever since he had opened that first let-

ter and seen the magnitude of his check — he could at last ask Averil Waring to marry him. Yes, without let or hindrance he could do that! More than two months had gone by since he had so hurriedly left Amalfi, but though Justin had sent him laconic notes and post-cards from time to time and a kind of truce had been patched up between them, there had come no news of his engagement. Peter felt he had been quite right in his cherished belief that Averil had never had the remotest intention of marrying Justin. Whether she would marry him was something that had yet to be ascertained.

He sat down, took out a sheet of note-paper and began to write. He did not intend to send the letter when it was written; it was only an experiment, just to convince himself that it could really be written now — there wasn't the shadow of an obstacle in the way! This evening he would write to her with all the love and longing that were in his heart, words that he felt too timid to allow her to see, and then later — to-morrow perhaps — he would destroy it and fashion one that should be more prudent and sober.

"My dearest Averil." He sat for some time looking at the words, half-frightened at his own immense daring. Then he took up the pen again. "Once when we were in the garden at the Villa Magnolia I almost told you what was in my heart. But we were interrupted just as I was trying to find some words that would not startle you too much, and I never had another opportunity. Certain things happened which urged me to return home, and then I saw, too, how rash and unwise, and even cruel, it would have been to bind your youth to a long and perhaps hopeless engagement. I was not in a position to marry you then, but now everything

is changed. 'Richard Scarsdale' has been a very great success, and I have had two wonderful and undreamed-of offers for my next three novels. And I love you, Averil. Oh, I am sure you must have known it without my telling you! And on that last evening beside the fountain I felt that you were not, perhaps, altogether indifferent to me. And my heart was telling you all the time how much I loved you. You have only to say the word and I will come. I love you, Averil, and I have only one dream in the world, and that is for you to be my darling wife."

He read over what he had written. The words seemed to him poor and bald; they expressed so little of that great tenderness which flowed from his heart like a great flood. He took up the pen again.

"I have no words to tell you how I love you. But when I see you again I will try to tell you."

It would not be so difficult then perhaps, with his hand closed upon hers, and her eyes — those grave, gray eyes of hers — looking up into his face.

There would be plenty of room for his wife as well as for Monica in the house he intended to take. Perhaps it would nestle among deep trees just above a little wooded combe on the coast of Dorsetshire or Devonshire. From the windows they would look out upon the blue waters of the Channel, with the gray shadow-shape of Portland outlined in the distant background against the sky, and the long yellow strip of Chesil Beach connecting the rock with the mainland. He was quite certain that she would love England. It was her own land, where she had a right to be. She would forget the Villa Annun-

ziata and her old life at Aspoli in that new life which they would live together. Not far off, perhaps, there would be a little gray village, with a tiny church built of the rough gray stone, where they could go together and pray. And later on, when he had touched those munificent sums offered to him, he might obtain permission to have a chapel in his own house. They would start a little mission — he had always dreamed of doing that. He saw himself kneeling beside Averil at Mass in their own chapel. The thought of so holy an intimacy filled him with a strange wonder.

In the spring, perhaps, they would be settled there. His thoughts traveled toward a wedding immediately after Easter. Their engagement would thus last six months. The book he had in hand would be finished long before then. And he would be, comparatively speaking, a rich man — quite rich enough to give Averil and Monica all that they could need. They did not require luxuries, only a simple, happy, and tranquil life.

He heard the postman's knock, announcing the last delivery that night. But surely no letters now could alter or increase his happiness. He must set to work soon and answer those he had already received.

The maid came into the room and he took a little heap of letters from her almost mechanically. On the top was one with the blue Italian stamp. It was directed to him in Justin's writing.

The thought of Justin jarred a little. As he examined the envelope he saw that the post-mark was "*Roma — Ferrovia*," with the hour and date clearly shown in the middle of the circle. Why was Justin in Rome? What was he doing there? Why had he left Aspoli? In his last letter he had mentioned

the fact that Princess Nadine had taken Miss Waring to Rome for a few weeks' change. Why had he followed them thither?

He opened the letter. It ran as follows:

"Dear old Peter: I am engaged to Averil Waring, and we shall be married, I hope, at the beginning of November. You were the first person to whom I ever spoke of my hopes, and I know you will wish me all joy and happiness and good luck. For I am very happy — it has all been so wonderful! The princess is kind enough to be delighted. She sends all sorts of kind messages to you.

"Yours,
"J. M."

The letter fell from Peter's hands to the floor with a little shivering crash. He stood quite still and not a muscle of his thin, dark face moved. He felt for the moment as he thought men must feel when shot suddenly through the heart. He remembered having heard it said that for a few seconds before death came they remained in an upright posture. That moment of fierce and agonizing consciousness was his then. He felt as if life itself were being slowly blotted out.

At last, after a long time, he made a great effort and moved back to the writing table. He took up the letter which he had written to Averil that evening — the letter that had not been intended for her eyes. He could never write that second letter now. The sight of those first words, "*My dearest Averil,*" and of the last ones, "*But when I see you I will try to tell you,*" stabbed him afresh. He tore the paper deliberately across and across and, putting it in the empty fireplace, he struck a match and set fire to it. He watched it as it was slowly con-

sumed. There was a trembling spurt of flame, flickering, uncertain; then a whiff of bluish smoke; then a dropping together of fine, charred, and blackened fragments.

When, if ever, he saw Averil again she would be Justin Mellor's wife.

He sat and stared dully at the blackened heap of paper that once had held such beautiful and tender words.

"It has all been so wonderfull!" That sentence from Justin's letter rang persistently in his ears.

CHAPTER XXI

AVERIL in those first days of her engagement was full of the cold and proud determination of one who has deliberately put her hand to the plow and will not even envisage defeat in the due accomplishment of the furrow.

Padre Lorenzo regretted that her choice should have fallen upon a Protestant, but he made no opposition to the proposed marriage provided that Justin was ready to make all the required promises. There was, therefore, no difficulty forthcoming from that quarter, which poor Averil had so hoped might prove to be the case. She would only allow a nominal engagement until that answer had been received.

But when it had come, and the affair could be regarded as settled, and Justin proceeded to ratify it by kissing Averil in that intimate manner which is the delight of happy lovers, the aspect of things became changed. Averil had not much to spare in the way of self-control; she freed herself from the embrace as quickly as she could, and left the room abruptly

before there was the slightest chance of his attempting to repeat it. Tears followed, and Justin did not see her again that day. He realized his mistake and saw that much patience would be required. And, after all, he had won his point. She had consented to an engagement, and if this allowed him few privileges, it at least secured him the daily sight of her. He was aware that she did not as yet love him, and once or twice he had seriously asked himself whether that love were hers to give.

Still, the princess was encouraging and sympathetic, and that salved his wounded vanity. She urged him to be patient. There was really no use in hurrying things and, after all, a good deal had been achieved. Although she did not tell him so, she was secretly a little astonished that Averil had so quickly consented to an engagement. She did not fathom that little hurt motive, or she might have been still more anxious about the future.

Justin was a man in whom any kind of opposition breeds a stubborn obstinacy. He was as firm in his determination to marry Averil as he had been in the past in his determination to possess the Villa Annunziata. In her presence he was humble and wistful, and for the time all his pride and arrogance had dropped from him. But he was hurt by her coldness and when he had written to tell Peter that "it had all been so wonderful," it had been done less to deceive him as to Averil's attitude than to assuage his own wounded spirit. He wanted other people to think that everything was progressing smoothly and happily; he was glad that there were no witnesses of that coldness which was his daily portion.

They had been engaged for several weeks and he had hardly once seen her alone. The princess was always there, pleasant, smiling, motherly, but with no intention of leaving them together. He strongly

felt that she was doing this in accordance with some expressed wish of Averil's, and that did not make it any easier to bear.

Justin was unfailingly cheerful and good-humored in spite of the ordeal he was undergoing. He was immensely hopeful about the future, and felt assured that Averil had not lightly given him her word. Almost every day they went sightseeing or for long expeditions in his big white car, and thus the time passed quickly and they were always occupied.

Then there was Averil's trousseau to be ordered. The princess went about this as a matter of course, and Averil, who at first showed some little reluctance on the subject, soon saw that such preparations were inevitable. She simply yielded, but displayed not the slightest interest and could hardly be prevailed upon to express an opinion, much less make a decision.

"Are you not happy, Averil?" the princess asked one evening when Justin had rather reluctantly taken his departure. He had evidently waited on in the hope of having a word with Averil alone.

"I can't say," said Averil. "Don't let us talk about it, please. I don't feel anything at all." She paused, and then said desperately:

"Could we go away for a little? To some place in the hills?"

"Yes; if you wish it, I could arrange to go away. But, Averil, if we do go, I think we must ask Justin to come, too."

"Not at once — not directly," said Averil. "I want to be alone with you as we were before. Perhaps, if it was necessary, he could come a little later."

Justin was not extremely pleased when this plan was broached to him by the princess.

"I think you had really better let her come away with me for a little. She feels the need of being

alone. You know what a solitary life hers has been."

She said this to him a few days later when she was already in treaty for a little villa overlooking one of the lakes of the Roman *Castelli*.

"Of course, if she wishes it, there is nothing to be said," said Justin. "But I see her so little, and never alone."

"Be patient," she advised. "Remember, in a few weeks she will be your wife."

He stirred restlessly.

"If she would only give me some sign that she cared!" he said, with a touch of passion.

"She has given you her word," said the princess. "Can't you be content with that? But I will send for you as soon as I can. In the country there will be fewer distractions, and you will be able to see more of each other."

"I hope so indeed," said Justin.

They left Rome in October and took possession of an old and small villa overlooking a blue lake set in a cup of the hills. At first the fresher air, the quiet country life, seemed to revive Averil; her spirits rose and she looked happier than she had done since her engagement. It was not very flattering to Justin, and the princess could not help feeling that his absence had a good deal to do with the change.

It had been arranged that the wedding should take place quietly in Rome about the middle of November. It had to be before Advent or inevitably postponed till after the New Year, according to the regulations of the Church. And Justin would not hear of the longer delay. The trousseau was all ordered before they left Rome, and no Roman patrician maiden could have had daintier or more delicate things than those that were being fashioned for Averil. They had made her realize that she was no

longer to be poor and dependent; she was to be the rich wife of a rich man. The princess had told her that she was settling a certain sum of money upon her on her wedding day; it would give her quite a large income.

But Averil had prayed for other riches, and fate had withheld that desired largess.

When they had been about a week at the villa Justin came out to stay with them. The first few days of his visit passed quite agreeably; he was as charming and pleasant and tactful as he knew how to be, and it seemed as if he were really making a great effort to adjust himself to a difficult and complicated situation. He was much more the friend than the lover, and he did try earnestly to win Averil. This seemed absurd on the face of it, for had he not already technically won her on the day she had promised to be his wife?

He became like a son of the house, and was at his best in the days that followed. Once or twice it really occurred to Averil that she would have liked him very much indeed and found him a most agreeable companion if she had not been going to marry him. After all, he was Peter's friend, and Peter must have found him, at any rate, at one time sympathetic; that always constituted a claim to her regard.

Even the princess never realized how wholly Averil's thoughts were still occupied with Peter Clutton. They differed according to her mood. There were days when they filled her heart with a tender absorption, and there were many, many days when they were bitter and disillusioned and made her set her teeth and determine to go on with this marriage which was so hateful to her.

One evening the princess was not feeling very well. She had a headache and a touch of fever, and

she went to bed soon after tea. Averil was dismayed, chiefly by the prospect of having to entertain Justin alone at dinner. Always hitherto she had avoided a *tête-à-tête* with him, and she would have given worlds to escape this one.

"Oh, but it's far better for you to see each other alone sometimes," said the princess when Averil made a protest to her.

She was sitting up in bed when she said this. There were two bright pink spots in her cheeks, and her violet eyes were shining. She looked, as indeed she was, extremely feverish.

A vague anxiety filled Averil's heart as she stood by her bedside. Was she really going to be very ill? Her past experience had made her nervous of illness, as the young often are when they have once seen death slip in with such fatal swiftness and carry off its prey. Death was no longer a remote figure to her. She clasped the princess' hand.

"Do you feel very ill?" she said rather abruptly.

"Oh, no, Averil — just a touch of fever. I shall be all right in the morning. I am rather tired this evening and feel lazier than usual."

But she held Averil's hand in hers and looked at her wistfully.

"Be nice to Justin," she said, smiling.

Averil's face changed and hardened.

"I'd much, *much* rather have my dinner here with you!"

"Oh, but that's impossible, and would be very rude, too. No — I'm not going to lecture you. But sometimes you make me feel sorry for Justin."

Averil flushed. She did not answer, but soon made a pretext for leaving her. She seemed to dread any discussion of her engagement, and was careful never to allude to it.

But the princess' words had made her feel a little

remorseful. Yes, she would try to be nice to him this evening—the first they had spent alone together. She put on a simple white tea-gown with a band of gold at her waist and another clasped round her hair. Justin had never seen her in this dress, and when she came into the old, faded salon, with its dim tapestries and hangings, he thought she looked superb. He even admired that cold dignity of hers; it was admirable, and exactly what he would like to see in his wife; it was only when so consistently displayed toward himself that it became rather trying.

After dinner he said to her:

"Let's go out, Averil. The moonlight on the lake is wonderful."

She hesitated.

"I must go and see the princess first. I must see if she wants anything."

She slipped away, white, elusive as a moth. Justin watched her.

"Don't be very long, Averil," he said.

His voice sounded very soft, and he lingered over her name. When she had vanished he went out into the loggia to wait for her. He walked up and down restlessly. Of course she would not hurry back to him; no doubt she had been longing to escape.

Averil stole softly into the princess' room. It was almost in darkness; a very small lamp was burning in the far corner of the room away from the bed. It suggested rather than revealed the amorphous shapes of the heavy, old-fashioned, dark furniture, with its massive carving.

She bent over her, putting her hand upon hers, and was a little startled to find that it was burning hot.

"Dear, do you want anything?"

Those were the words she had always used on approaching her mother; she uttered them almost mechanically now. But they struck a chord of memory that was both sweet and sad, and they awakened within her a nebulous fear that caught at her heart.

"Dear, do you want anything?"

She repeated the words a little louder. The princess opened her eyes.

"No, darling. And if I do, Gemma's here. Go back to Justin."

She put up her hand and touched the girl's cheek.

"Did you have a nice dinner? Did you talk like a good little hostess?"

"I tried to. But Justin wants me to go out — to see the moonlight on the lake."

"But sure to wrap up well. The night air is cold and treacherous up here."

"But must I go? I'd so *much* rather sit here with you. Let me stay with you. I'll be very quiet — I won't disturb you."

"But, dear Averil, you really can't leave Justin alone. And there is no reason why you shouldn't go out. But don't be late. Tell him I want you to be in by ten o'clock."

Averil lingered for a moment. Then the old habit of obedience prevailed. She stooped down and kissed the princess, and went to her room to fetch a wrap. She threw a dark cloak over her shoulders and fastened it at the throat with a gleaming silver clasp. Her fair hair was uncovered, bound lightly together by the golden fillet. She went back to the loggia.

"I am ready, Justin. Which way shall we go? The princess says I must not stay out later than ten o'clock."

Justin sprang up quickly. He had not expected her to return so soon.

"Let's go down to the lake. The path will be quite dry if we go through the vineyard."

There was a broad path that ran through the vineyard to the edge of the lake. It was bordered by tall cypress-trees, sharply pointed and looking like spires of ebony in the moonlight. There were strange patterns on the ground, diapered with silver and indigo blue that was almost black. But to Averil it seemed that the trees were hostile, and that formless shadows were awaiting there to swallow her up. At the bottom of the vineyard there was a group of olive-trees, ancient, gnarled, with hollow trunks; she felt as if some unseen danger lurked secretly and menacingly in those dark spaces.

She trembled, and wished that she had not come.

It was almost a relief to hear Justin speak sometimes, in a voice that sounded cheery and reassuring. He was feeling intensely happy, for now he was really alone with Averil at last, and the beauty of the southern moonlight must, he felt sure, make its appeal to her.

They walked side by side down the path; sometimes she swerved a little so that involuntarily her arm touched his. She was conscious of his proximity, and while it diminished the unseen perils that she felt were now surrounding her, it gave her an added fear because she was quite alone with him, and the vineyard at this hour was deserted. This troubled her, although his presence certainly guarded and protected her from the obscure hostility of the night.

He said suddenly:

"It's odd, isn't it, that I've never had a line from Clutton to congratulate me? I wrote telling him of our engagement some weeks ago."

"Oh, did you?" said Averil. Her voice was quite steady, clear, and cold.

She hoped that he would go on speaking of Clutton. Even this single mention of his name had seemed to break down a little the dark, dividing barriers that had arisen between herself and Peter. And she had often wondered if Justin had told Peter of their engagement. Latterly there had been some instinct in her, born of a sensitive honor, a delicate loyalty, to banish Peter from her thoughts. Now the very sound of his name filled her with sick eagerness to know more, to hear more.

"But Monica Clutton wrote to me long ago and told me that the book 'Richard Scarsdale' was going better than ever — Peter's roped in quite a lot of money. They're leaving town — he's taken a house in the country."

In the wan moonlight he thought that her face looked now as if it had been carved out of some white substance — marble or ivory. It had the sharply-defined, precise lines of a very delicate carving. And the moonlight gave a curious frosty look to her fair, uncovered hair, bound Greek-wise in a golden fillet.

"I am glad it has been such a success. It was very clever."

"Oh, you have read it, then?" he said, in some surprise.

"Yes; I borrowed it from a library in Rome."

He gave a sigh of relief. He had been for a moment afraid that Peter had sent her a copy. It was strange how that old formless jealousy of Peter did still occasionally obsess his thoughts. Would there ever come a day when they could laugh over it together in happy intimacy?

"Monica says that Morgan has offered Peter a huge price for his next three novels. One is to be out soon. I daresay he's been too busy to write. Still — it's queer of him not to send a line."

They had stopped at the edge of the lake. It lay there very still, shining like a silver shield with deep, deep black and purple shadows. Far away they could hear a voice singing one of the plaintive Italian melodies.

"Isn't it wonderful — the color of the southern moonlight?" he said.

(But how much more wonderful that moonlight as it fell upon her face!)

"Yes, it is wonderful. It makes the lake look quite different."

Although they were alone and so close together that by moving his hand a few inches he could have touched her, he was bitterly aware that her spirit was far away, utterly removed from him.

"Averil, in a very few weeks now you will be my wife."

"Yes," she said.

She did not look toward him even then; her eyes were fixed steadily upon the lake and on the purple hills that formed a deep cup around it.

"Will you promise to try to be happy? I love you so much. I want you to be very happy."

Averil did not speak. But something in his voice touched her; it held a note of almost forlorn entreaty.

"Of course, you are very young. You can hardly know what love means. Such love as I feel for you."

She did not speak, but held herself very still and motionless.

"I am sure I am the first man who has ever spoken to you of love or wished to marry you."

"Yes," said Averil.

"I am very glad of that," said Justin.

It was her ignorance, not her knowledge of love, that held her so aloof.

"It will be beautiful when you and I are alone together at the Villa Annunziata. I shall feel that my destiny guided me there that day, six years ago, when I saw it first as a passing traveler. I am longing for the day to come, Averil. Don't you wish for it, too?"

He longed to hear her speak.

"Don't you?" he said again.

"I have never thought about it at all," said Averil in a low, timid tone.

He took her hand in his and held it for a moment to his lips.

"I worship you," he said in a low, passionate voice. "No man has ever worshiped a woman as I worship you."

She listened with a curious sense of unreality. His words did not move her at all. But she resented his touch and she drew her hand quickly away.

"But I can't care for you like that," she said hurriedly. "You mustn't expect it."

"Oh, you will learn. And I will be very patient ——" He stopped abruptly; her words had made him whiten with fear.

"I think we ought to go in," she said; "we have been here a very long time. It must be past ten o'clock."

She turned, and began mounting the steep path that ran like a band of silver, patterned with ebony, between the twin rows of cypress-trees. She walked as if she were very tired and greatly exhausted.

"Averil — take my hand. Let me help you up this steep bit."

"No, thank you. I would rather go alone."

She went on resolutely ahead of him.

When they reached the terrace at the top she halted for a moment.

"Don't run away from me, Averil dear. I didn't

mean to say anything to vex you. But when people are engaged they are sometimes permitted to speak of love — to plan and dream about the future they will spend together."

"You don't vex me. But it's late — I must go in."

"Just one more moment, Averil dear."

She paused obediently. She must explain to the princess how long he had detained her against her will.

"You don't think you're beginning to change — to care a little?" he said, with that strange wistfulness in his voice.

"I can't tell. I don't understand myself. Please don't speak of it, Justin."

He came a little nearer.

"Oh, my darling," he said, "may I not kiss you to-night?"

Before she could remonstrate he was holding her to him with arms of iron; his lips were pressed to hers. She felt the man's strength; the hard, determined will that lay behind that soft voice, that pleading manner.

"Please — let me go ——" she said.

She was trembling from head to foot. But Justin still held her, kissing her. She burst into tears.

"Please let me go," she said again. "You are cruel — you are cruel."

"But I love you," he said, releasing her slowly.

She escaped and ran swiftly indoors; he could hear a sound of low, ill-restrained sobbing as she went.

Justin paced up and down the terrace for some little time longer. He had a vague hope that she might repent and return. But she did not come back and at last he went indoors and up to his room. The sitting-rooms, as he passed through, were all in

darkness and there was no one about. Averil was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XXII

ON the following day Averil did not appear, and although Justin waited about idly all the morning, he saw no sign of her. At last he questioned Gemma, whom he met bearing a tray toward the princess' room. She looked at him in some surprise.

"The Signore has not heard? The Signora Principessa is very ill — very ill indeed — and the Signorina has not left her all the morning. She is waiting for the doctor to arrive from Rome."

"Ill?" he repeated, with a sudden sense of dismay. "Why — what is the matter with her? I thought she only had a headache and felt a little tired last night."

"She is very ill," repeated Gemma stolidly. "I do not know what is the matter with her, but she has much fever."

"Don't you think the Signorina could come and speak to me for a moment?"

Gemma shook her head.

"She will not leave the bedside. She is very anxious."

She moved away down the passage, carrying her tray.

Justin went back to the loggia. Through a break in the trees he was able to see from that side of the house a wide and very beautiful view of the Roman Campagna. Far, far away in the plain lay a patch of silver light which he knew was Rome. A frail mist hung over the city, obscuring its outlines, but the great Dome of St. Peter's was visible like a pale bubble formed of some pearly substance. The

Campagna lay there almost like a sea of pale gold and silver with little mauve and blue shadows, all painted in delicate blond tones of coloring. The chestnut woods that sheltered the villa on the west were brilliant in their autumn garments of russet and gold. There was a delicious crisp feeling in the air that made it almost as heady as wine. It was a day to be out of doors — to wander forth and look at the wide, outspread Campagna and the distant, shining, turquoise line of the sea.

But he wanted to see Averil, especially after their agitated parting last night. He wanted to know that she had forgiven him. It was partly because of those kisses that she was keeping away from him to-day, he felt sure. The thought gave him a sharp sense of anxiety. Perhaps she would not readily risk being alone with him again.

He waited alone all that morning. Luncheon was generally at half past twelve, but at that hour there was no sign of it. Justin was feeling hungry and his hunger made him irritable. He had smoked innumerable cigarettes since his early coffee, but he had not been able to settle to any more definite occupation, and the time had hung very heavily on his hands. It was about one o'clock when Averil at last appeared. She came into the *salotto*, whose windows overlooked the lake, across the sloping vineyard that dipped down to its shore. There were peeling frescoes on the walls, delicate, dim landscapes of the Castelli Romani. It was a severe, uncomfortably furnished room, but Averil preferred it to the others. There was something austere and distinctive about it that belonged to an age when people gave less thought to comfort and luxury. Mrs. Waring had belonged to that epoch, and she had instilled something of its characteristic austerity and frugality into her young daughter.

On meeting Justin she gave him her hand — such a cold little hand. He felt that she must have been sitting still all the morning to keep as cold as that, for the sunshine was brilliantly warm to-day, despite the brisk autumn feeling in the air. The sky was blue and cloudless, and the little hill-town lay bathed in sunshine. It had been a golden morning and he wished that they could have spent it together — two happy lovers roaming in the woods and by the lakeside.

"How is she?" he said.

Averil looked very pale and tired, as if she had been awake all night. There were little dark stains under her eyes.

"She is asleep now. I have told them to come and call me as soon as she wakes."

"Has the doctor been? What does he say?"

"He is afraid of — of typhoid fever," said Averil.

As she pronounced the words her eyes grew bright with fear.

Justin was startled into silence. The words held a very ominous sound and the princess did not look a strong woman at the best of times. Besides, in any case, it would mean a long, long illness.

"Oh, I hope it won't prove to be that!" he exclaimed, after a pause.

"The doctor will come again to-night, and then he said he might be able to tell for certain."

Luncheon was announced and they went into the dining-room. During the meal Averil was very silent and preoccupied. She ate little, and always she seemed to be listening for any sound from the sick-room. Justin, patient enough at first, could at last hardly conceal his irritation at her anxiety, her preoccupation. If Princess Nadine had been her own

mother it would have been only natural for her to feel this acute suspense. But she was no relation at all; she had known Averil hardly longer than he had himself.

Presently Gemma appeared to tell her that the princess was now awake and asking for her. She rose instantly and left the room. She seemed eager to go. After a little delay she sent Gemma back with a message asking him to finish the meal alone. She could not return; she was wanted in the sick-room.

There was no help for it, and he finished luncheon without her. He went out into the loggia and his coffee was brought to him there. He lit a cigarette and began to smoke, waiting for Averil as he had done all the morning.

From the loggia he could hear footsteps passing up and down the passage quickly and hurriedly, as if bent on some important errand that admitted of no delay. Sometimes, too, he heard voices speaking in hushed and subdued tones. There was an unquiet atmosphere about the house to-day—that tense, expectant, nervous atmosphere which is only created by serious illness. He began to understand that the princess was really very ill indeed, and that she was absorbing the concentrated attention of the whole household. No one could think of or attend to any one or anything else.

He went back to the *salotto* at the other side of the house, and looked across the empty, stripped vineyard to the lake. It wore an almost sullen aspect now; its color was of a uniform dull steel-gray that was metallic and ugly. There were no lights and shadows on the water. The wind had dropped, and the trees were motionless, and an almost sultry atmosphere prevailed outside. The sky was over-

cast, and in the west there was grouped a fleet of black, unmoving clouds, rimmed with a line of lurid gold that promised thunder.

The beautiful morning had not fulfilled its early promise, and now there was something threatening and unnerving about the day, as if some catastrophe were imminent. A kind of unnatural darkness and obscurity seemed to have descended suddenly upon the scene. Even the mountains stood up dark and menacing.

If only Averil would come back!

But he hardly saw her again that day. She came to him just for a moment before dinner to say that she hoped he would not mind dining alone. She could not leave the princess.

"But you must have something to eat yourself, Averil!" he remonstrated.

She shook her head.

"Oh, I'm not hungry. I hope they will look after you. Good-night, Justin."

"Good-night?" he echoed. "Does that mean I shall not see you again this evening?"

Averil drew herself up a little.

"I can't leave her," she said with decision.

Well, it was not the moment, as he ruefully felt, to show himself hurt. He could see that she was dreadfully overwrought and anxious, and perhaps she scarcely knew what she was saying. But to feel that his presence conveyed no kind of comfort to her was a bitter pill which he must perforce swallow. Perhaps, indeed, she lived in dread of a repetition of last night's scene when he had held her in his arms.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I offended you last night. I am very sorry — will you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," she said quietly,

and then without another word she went out of the room.

The days that followed were very strange ones. It seemed, indeed, to the little group of persons in the old villa overlooking the lake that they had been plunged suddenly and without warning into some immense tribulation. The princess was very ill indeed, and the illness was now definitely declared to be typhoid fever. Averil only left the sick-room for a few minutes at a time; she even took it in turns to stay there half the night. Justin wandered about, restless and miserable, never going far lest he should miss one of those rare glimpses of her which were all he had to content him now.

Since that night on the terrace he felt that she had deliberately eluded him. Of course, she was absorbed by the princess' illness, and he was relegated to a secondary place that was extremely galling to his pride. It was on the fourth day that she came to him, looking very white and exhausted and rather tearful.

"I am very sorry," she said in a hurried tone, "but we shall want your room. The doctor says I am to get two nurses at once. I know it has been very dull for you, and perhaps you will prefer to go back to Rome — or to Aspoli. I am afraid you must think I have been neglecting you, but I couldn't help it."

"Does that mean she is worse?" said Justin.

"She is very ill, and Gemma and I can not manage by ourselves."

"I could go to the hotel at Albano — that would be nearer than Rome," he said.

She said quickly:

"Oh, I would rather you went to Rome, if you don't mind."

Justin flinched. But he only said:

"If I go to Rome you must promise to write and tell me if you should need any help, if there is anything I can do or bring. They haven't said——" and now he paused and looked at her, "that there's any danger?"

"The doctor didn't say that. But typhoid is always dangerous. I knew a little girl—a *contadino's* child at Aspoli—who died of it."

"Oh, but you mustn't have such melancholy thoughts," said Justin.

Justin hated leaving her, but there was no help for it, and even he had felt during the last day or two that his endurance was at the snapping point. He knew that if she had loved him she would have let him share her anxiety, and in her rare moments of leisure she would have come to him for comfort and support. Sorrow brings those who love each other into a deeper, more beautiful intimacy, perhaps even a closer one, than a joy mutually shared can ever do.

But from the first he had felt himself deliberately shut out from her anxiety as if she were guarding it jealously from him, almost as if she were afraid of the intimacy it might produce. He saw clearly that by remaining he would only harm his own cause.

"You will promise to write—to send for me if I can be of use?" he said again.

"I can't make promises," she said.

When he was ready to go and the car had come round to the door she came out to say good-by to him, and just for a moment they saw each other alone in the *salotto*.

"Good-by, Justin," she said, and held out her hand.

He lifted it to his lips and kissed it.

"Good-by, Averil, my darling," he said softly.

She moved toward the door. "I mustn't stay—

I only came for a moment just to say good-by."

"But you will write?" he persisted.

"When I have time."

"I shall be very anxious to know how she is."

"Yes, you shall hear," said Averil.

"And very soon I shall come out and ask."

They went out together, and Averil watched him get into the car, and then she suddenly moved forward and whispered impulsively:

"Please don't think me unkind — or rude. I'm so miserable about her!"

"Oh, that's all right," said Justin cheerily.

But when he had gone Averil experienced a sense of relief that was almost violent. She was free — she was free — and it suddenly occurred to her that when she was married she would never be able to recover this delicious sense of freedom. She could never urge him to go away; it would be his right to be there, with her — always — till the end of her life. The terrible finality of it all came home to her then as never before. There would never be a day in all the years without Justin if he chose to be there. And to judge from his present conduct, he would always choose to be there. Whatever her sorrows and anxieties were, she would have to let him share them — that also would be his inalienable right. She could never shut him out as she was doing now. And he was timid and humble and eager to do her bidding now, even though it hurt him, for fear of displeasing her. She felt her power, and she used it without mercy. There had been many moments when she had crept away to her own room rather than spend them with him. And she had made him go back to Rome, although she knew it hurt him to hear her say so. She reproached herself with unkindness, the more so because he had hardly reproached her at all. He had accepted all that she

offered without complaint. But would that timid and humble manner survive when they were once married? The memory of his fierce kisses troubled her. For that moment he had been master, and she had been just a weak child in his arms.

But she could not long let her thoughts dwell upon Justin. She had a great deal to do to prepare for the arrival of the two nurses. They would release her from the performance of many arduous duties in the sick-room, but she was afraid that she would see less of the princess after they had taken charge.

The nurses arrived later in the day — two capable-looking young English women, who seemed at once to take complete possession of their patient. They were young and evidently thoroughly assured of their own competence. Averil speedily found herself dethroned. She had to obey them and to submit when they told her that she must not enter the sick-room for fear of disturbing their patient. Averil preferred the night-nurse, who was called Nurse Davis. She was less severe and dictatorial than the other, and gave her more liberty to go and come as she chose. But they had not been there very long when a decided change for the worse set in, and when Averil stole into the room one evening the princess did not seem to notice her. She was speaking in a rapid, incoherent way and she did not address Averil, and when the girl stooped down to catch the words she found, to her dismay, that the princess was not speaking English at all. She was talking Russian. It was all very alarming.

During the very anxious days that followed Averil often went up to the little hill-town that was just above the villa to pray in the church. She said countless rosaries before a statue of the Madonna, entreating her to join her prayers to hers that her beloved friend might be spared. She knew without

being told that the princess' life was in grave danger. From her one sharp experience of illness and loss she had inherited a fear to which the very name of illness was joined. But the two cases had been very different. Mrs. Waring had been ill for so long that her death was like the gradual extinguishing of a dying flame; it had been a fading out of life. But the princess was still in many ways a young woman; she was hardly fifty years old and she still kept much of the vigor and activity and the beauty of youth. People often imagined her to be at least ten years younger than she was.

One evening the nurse came to fetch her.

"She has been asking for you, Miss Waring. I think you had better go in for a moment."

Averil stole softly up to the bedside and laid her hand on that thin and wasted one. It gave her a shock to feel how thin it was, so dry, too, and burning, as if the fever were eating her away, consuming her with its fire.

"Princess," she said.

The princess opened her eyes.

"Why do you not say Nadine?" she said irritably. "All my friends call me Nadine — Oh, Averil, is that you?" in a changed and much more affectionate tone. "I thought you were some one else. Where have you been to, my dear, and what have you done with Justin?"

"He has gone back to Rome. There wasn't room for him when the nurses came."

"I'm afraid it must have been a disappointment to him to have his visit cut short like that."

"He saw that it couldn't be helped. He told me he would come out one day to ask after you, but he has never been."

"You must not let my illness interfere with your

wedding," said Nadine in a very weak tone. "I should like it to take place next month whether I am well enough to be present or not."

"Oh, please not!" said Averil, with sudden entreaty. "I couldn't leave you — you mustn't ask me to — until you are well again. It would make me miserable." There were tears in her eyes.

"But, my darling, Justin won't like being kept waiting."

"Oh, he must do as I wish now," said Averil. "When we are married I shall be obliged to do whatever he wants for ever and ever. But not now — he must wait as long as I choose — until you are quite, quite well again."

Nurse Davis came into the room.

"You mustn't agitate her," she whispered to Averil; "it will send up her temperature. She's much too weak to talk any longer."

Averil went quietly out of the room, but she, too, had been agitated by the conversation and she was very near to tears. These days had been a severe strain upon her nerves and she had had too little sleep. The mere question of her marriage provoked an additional unrest, but she was determined to have her own way in the matter. She would never leave Nadine until she was well. And if Justin objected he could always apply the drastic remedy of breaking off the engagement. Oh, if he would only break it off and tell her that he did not care for her any more, what an immense relief it would be! She had almost forgotten the motive which had constrained her to accept him; her whole thoughts were so fully occupied with Nadine and her illness. But if only some good angel would whisper to Justin that he would be far happier without Averil, what a comfort it would be to all concerned!

CHAPTER XXIII

SOME days later a parcel came for Averil. So little had been said about her engagement — and, indeed, she had few friends to whom it was necessary to announce it — that Averil had received so far no wedding-presents, nor had she expected any. She had received, it is true, a few lines of sincere congratulation from old Mr. Robinson, who felt that he had indeed been wisely counseled to permit her to remain with Princess Nadine at Aspoli, since it had resulted in such brilliant and fruitful consequences. He was delighted to think, he said, that she would return to her own old home under such propitious auspices. But he had said nothing about sending her any present to commemorate the occasion, and he was the only person she could think of who would be likely to send her anything from England.

Justin had given her a ring, which she dutifully wore whenever he was present or expected to come, and a fine string of pearls, which she had never yet been able to bring herself to put on at all. And the princess had promised to give her a diamond necklace and pendant on her wedding-day, as well as some beautiful old lace which she had worn at her own marriage. Beyond these few things Averil expected nothing at all.

She did not know the writing on the parcel which came from London.

When she had untied the string and detached the paper a note slipped out. Her heart began to beat with sickening violence, and she could scarcely read the words on the sheet of paper when she drew it from the envelope. The letter consisted only of a very few lines in a small, neat handwriting.

It ran as follows:

"Dear Miss Waring: Justin has told me of your engagement, and I am taking the liberty of sending you a copy of my new novel, 'Until the Harvest,' with best wishes for your happiness.

"Yours sincerely,
"PETER CLUTTON."

A long time passed before Averil stirred from her seat. Across the lake, visible from her window, the summits of the hills were brightly illuminated by the reflection from the sunset. All else was in shadow, and the waters of the lake, lying in their profound basin and deeply shadowed by the surrounding hills, were colored in a flat, lifeless tone of darkest indigo. It looked like a solitary eye lying in a cup of verdure. A group of cypresses stood up sharply defined and mournful in aspect. The hills rose in delicate shades of green and violet, with that fragile illumination of gold lying along their summits.

At last, out of that long, long unbroken silence he had written to her; he had sent her coldly his wishes for her happiness. The words mocked her; it was as if shrill voices echoed them, interspersing them with elfin goblin laughter. They scourged her to a fresh sense of shame.

Then she took up the book. It was beautifully bound in white vellum, and the title, as well as the author's name, were done in gold lettering. It had evidently been bound thus to make it more suitable as a wedding-gift. This much of thought for her there had been. She opened it, passing her hand caressingly over the leaves. It was Peter's book — the book of which he had often spoken to her and of which only the last chapters had had to be written after he left Aspoli. He had told her that if he had the proofs in August the book would probably be published in October. It had already been in the

hands of his publishers when he left England, but he had stipulated that he wished to make some changes in the last chapters because he was not perfectly satisfied with them. She remembered these details now. And perhaps some day she would read the book. But now she had the feeling that it would hurt her too much, recalling his words and sayings too vividly to her mind, just as "Richard Scarsdale" had done. Even just to hold it thus in her hand seemed to bring him back too forcibly to her mind and memory, to set him before her in all his splendid, strong manhood as on that last evening at Aspoli. She had tried to exile him from her thoughts; now she found such a feat was impossible; he was always there, so to speak, on the threshold of them, ready to enter in and take possession.

The evening wore on. A dusky blue veil hung over the lake, obscuring it. One or two of the houses on the opposite shore were already showing their lights. Inside the villa it was very still, and she had not heard any one open the door of the princess' room for quite a long time. Perhaps she was asleep. In that case it would be better not to disturb her. It wanted an hour yet before Nurse Davis would go on duty, and then she would be sure to come and tell her when she could go and see Nadine.

An idea suddenly presented itself to her. She would write now and thank Peter for his gift.

It did not take many minutes, for she wrote it quickly. It was a pitiful little note, hastily scrawled.

"Dear Mr. Clutton: Thank you very much for sending me your new book. I know I shall enjoy reading it, for I liked 'Richard Scarsdale' so much. I am very anxious and unhappy now. Princess Nadine is very ill with typhoid fever; we have two

nurses. Please pray for her recovery. I often feel as if I could not pray.

“Yours sincerely,
“AVERIL WARING.”

She made no mention of Justin, and even after she had sealed and sent the letter the omission never struck her.

She went out to post it, and then, instead of returning at once to the villa, she wandered restlessly down to the lakeside. It was almost dark now, and the woods on the hillside slopes lay in masses of deep black shadow, silent, secret, full of mystery. In the dark blue waters of the lake the lights from the opposite houses were faintly reflected, and those of half-hidden villas showed flickeringly between the trees. To the west the massed lights of the little hill-town, perched very high above her head, seemed to be beckoning to the stars that were already beginning to show.

She went down to the very edge of the lake, and a little chill wind blew across it and made her suddenly shiver. It was the same spot where she and Justin had lingered not so many nights ago; she remembered it with something of shame. She wondered why he had not been to see her. It was four days now since he had returned to Rome. He had written to her every day, but so far she had not written to him. She had tried to do so, but it was impossible. She could not write the kind of letter he would want to receive from her, modeled, perhaps, on his own, full of love and tenderness. Perhaps he was angry with her for not having written. She could always tell him when he came that she had been too busy or too tired.

Then she accused herself of selfishness because she was so immersed in her own affairs when all the

time the princess was lying dangerously ill. She hurried back to the house, almost fearful lest she had been wanted and they had not been able to find her. But the day-nurse, whom she met in the passage, told her that the princess was still sleeping quietly; she seemed a little more tranquil this evening. It was a relief to hear this and she went quietly back to her own room.

That same evening she began to read Peter's book, "Until the Harvest." It was an absorbing story — the detailed history of a man from his early boyhood. He was brought up carefully, even rigorously, by an extremely pious mother, was educated at Catholic schools and colleges, and later on he apostatized. It was the kind of novel that has come into fashion of late years, beginning with an account of the hero's boyhood and school-days. The Catholic environment made it different from other novels of the same order, and gave it a certain freshness of outlook. It was a fine piece of work, and perhaps Peter had never done anything better. It was written from first to last with delicacy and an almost austere economy. The hero was beloved by two women, both beautiful, both good, the one a Protestant, the other a Catholic. He ended by marrying the former, whose influence became finally so great that he apostatized. It put before Averil very clearly and relentlessly some of the difficulties and complications attendant upon the ordinary "mixed marriage," even when there is no vast amount of opposition and prejudice. She had the feeling as she read on with increased absorption that Peter was there in the room, talking to her, warning her, showing her the dangers of the step she was about to take. It was a step in the dark. She had never discussed the subject of her religion with Justin, but the princess had told her, and he himself had told her, that

he was ready to make all the promises that were required of him. He had even suggested once that in time she might convert him to her Faith. For the rest, he had seemed to prefer to keep the matter out of sight.

Now, Averil had never lived among Protestants; she knew nothing of the active hostility that still prevails in many quarters toward the Catholic Church; she was ignorant, too, of the prejudices that exist among Protestants concerning it. She had lived always in Italy, where such opposition as there is is always fiercely and definitely anti-Christian. But there were certain things in Peter's book which seemed to warn her of things that were unknown to her. She began to understand why her mother had urged her never to marry a man of another faith, and also to realize very clearly that had Mrs. Waring been alive, she would not have been allowed to marry Justin, even if she had been in love with him.

Averil's engagement had been brought about in very great measure by Princess Nadine and Justin Mellor. It had practically been arranged by them, as marriages in Italy nearly always are. Justin had spoken to the princess and she had approved. It was suitable, the young man wished for it very earnestly, there was money, the social standing was equal. If anything, the advantages to be gained were on Averil's side, for Justin was rich and her own dot was tiny. The question of religion had hardly entered into it at all. It was sufficient that Justin was ready to fulfil the conditions, which was another proof of his eager determination to win Averil. The girl gave her consent, perhaps unaware that the princess had really used a certain amount of firm but very kind pressure, dilating upon the advantages of such a marriage. And, on the face of it, the arrangement was perfect; even Mr. Robinson, hard-

headed old lawyer that he was, readily admitted that. It was a piece of luck for Averil that this young man should have taken a fancy to her.

Averil, tingling from the blow to her pride and convinced that Peter did not and had never cared for her, had lent herself to the scheme to show him that she cared nothing for him. Her self-respect had been sharply wounded by the episode of the summer, and Justin, with his adoring love, had to a certain extent restored it to her. In the beginning she had felt a certain gratitude toward him for lifting her out of the dust and setting her upon a pinnacle. And he was satisfied with so little; he persuaded himself that Averil would certainly learn in time to love him.

But Peter's book held more than a mere warning for her. In the earlier chapters there was a scene in an English garden where the hero was alone, before his marriage, with the woman he really loved. He had laid his hand on hers, had called her by her name. Suddenly they had been interrupted. Complications ensued; he married the other woman, under whose influence he renounced his heritage of faith, and it was not until the final chapter that, free and penitent, he returned to seek that earlier love. It was this scene which came to Averil with all the force of a sudden illumination. It was described as follows:

"Do you remember the day when we were in the garden at Lutcomb — the day when Carolyn interrupted us?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I had something to say to you then. I never said it."

She looked up. "Can't you tell me now?" she asked unthinkingly.

But before he could speak some look in his face had revealed the truth to her.

"I have come to tell you ——" he said.

And, as on that day five years before, he took her hands in his, only this time he drew her close to him.

"What I wanted to tell you then — what I want to tell you now — are one and the same thing. I love you."

The book dropped from Averil's hand, and she gave a low cry. She felt then as if Peter were actually near her saying those words: "*I love you.*" Beyond all doubt now she knew that he loved her. Perhaps he had even hoped to return some day and tell her of his love, and finish that interrupted speech begun near the fountain in the garden at the Villa Magnolia. And now — he must have known that it was too late, since she was going to marry Justin. Surely those two scenes had been written after his return to England.

And yet — and yet — had he not told Justin that such a marriage for her would satisfy the claims of poetic justice? What had he meant by those words? It was impossible for her to reconcile the two things. Only just now she had felt that he was near her, speaking to her, telling her of his love, unchanged and changeless.

She had been unaware of the passing of time, and when she looked at her watch she saw that it was past three o'clock. She had been sitting there for hours, absorbed and motionless. Now she suddenly felt cramped and cold. She rose stiffly, undressed, and said her prayers. The house was hushed into silence; there was no stir. Just before getting into bed she opened her door and stole softly down the passage to ascertain if there was any movement in the princess' room. But there was none. A little

chink of light showed under the door, but the passage was in darkness. She went quickly to bed.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON the following morning Justin appeared about twelve o'clock with the evident intention of remaining to luncheon and perhaps of spending most of the rest of the day with her.

"You look tired," was his greeting as he regarded her with his piercing, pale eyes. "You haven't been sitting up, have you?"

Averil flushed a little. She was not at all prepared to tell him why she had sat up so late last night, nor how she had employed those momentous hours. She said evasively:

"I am tired — I was rather late going to bed last night."

"How is the princess?"

"I've hardly seen her to-day. But Nurse Davis said she had a quiet night."

"But if she had a quiet night, why on earth did you sit up?" he asked.

"I didn't sit up with her," said Averil. "She is very weak this morning, however. We are expecting the doctor to come — he hasn't been yet." She changed the subject hastily, nervously.

They were standing side by side in the *salotto* overlooking the lake. October was nearing its end, and the woods on the opposite side were red and golden with their fading foliage. Overhead the sky was very blue, and the lake was steely blue to-day, with but little movement on the water.

At luncheon Averil said suddenly:

"Since you went away I have had a wedding present."

"You've been luckier than I have, then. Who was it from?"

"Your friend Mr. Clutton. He sent me his new book, 'Until the Harvest.'"

"I suppose it's the usual kind of thing? A tract-cum-novel?" said Justin, smiling, but speaking with a note of cynicism.

"I didn't think it was like a tract," said Averil. "I found it very interesting."

"You are singularly favored in any case. Peter simply hates giving his books away."

After all, why should he mind? It was only natural that Clutton, who had seen so much of Averil at Aspoli, should send her a wedding present. Still — his own book. There was something so personal, so almost intimate, about such a proceeding.

"It's the history of a man from his early childhood."

"No doubt a realistic picture of the Clutton nursery!"

"And then it goes on with his school-days."

"Peter's own school-days under the priests? He never went to a decent English public school."

"I suppose it must be taken from his own experience. It's very detailed — it makes a vivid picture," said Averil thoughtfully.

"But I am sure there's an immense amount of Catholic atmosphere, as they call it. I'm told his books are extraordinarily popular at convent schools and in seminaries."

"Don't sneer," said Averil quickly.

She was sorry that she had said this, but he had provoked her by this sequence of contemptuous speeches.

"I'm sorry." Justin was quickly penitent; he did not want to annoy her to-day. "But, you know, I think he overdoes that kind of thing. It puts one

off; at least I know it put me off. After the first I never opened another."

"If you were a Catholic I'm sure you'd read them and — admire them."

"Perhaps I should. But then, you see, I'm not one," he answered, feeling faintly uncomfortable.

"I wish you were," said Averil quietly.

Her gray eyes were fixed upon him quite steadily. There was nothing to flatter him in this grave and critical scrutiny.

"I've got to promise to let you try to convert me," he said gaily, "but don't please begin yet, Averil."

Although he said the words lightly, she saw that they were seriously meant.

He added: "You mustn't frighten me, you know."

She felt the reproof in his voice. She was silent, fearing that she had said too much, and aware that she had been stimulated by those fears and warnings conveyed to her by the perusal of "Until the Harvest."

"You're really the very first person I've heard praise Peter's novels," he said. "Why, it was only the other day you were in ecstasies over 'Richard Scarsdale'!"

She flushed under the look he gave her, a keen, quick look that was searching in its scrutiny. He grew bolder.

"Once — when we were all at Aspoli last summer — I was almost jealous of Peter."

Averil felt as if he had suddenly become aware of her wound and had proceeded deliberately to stab it. Although his voice was even softer than usual, there was intention in the speech. And he watched her closely as if to observe the effect of it upon her.

Averil was too much horrified at the unexpected

turn the conversation had taken to be able to answer. If only the doctor would come she would have an excuse to escape. They were not yet halfway through luncheon, and Justin was eating more slowly than usual.

"You seemed to find such a lot to say to each other, you know. I'd always looked upon you as so very cold and reserved. But with Peter you positively chattered."

"I didn't!" Averil flashed out indignantly.

"Oh, you mustn't be angry," said Justin suavely. "Besides, it's quite understandable. You must have had so many things in common to discuss and compare notes about. Confessions and penances and rosaries and all the rest of it. The good priests in London think no end of Peter — he's quite one of their show boys. Some day he will marry Lady Ann, and they'll take a house in the East End and lead the higher life in the Whitechapel Road. She is the only woman I've ever heard Peter praise, and I am sure she likes him because she goes down and sings to those grubby little boys. He will marry her when Monica dies, or even before if he makes his fortune."

Justin smiled, a cold, unmirthful smile. At that moment Averil felt that she almost hated him. She remembered what Peter had said about Lady Ann Cheverton, and it seemed in a sense to confirm Justin's words. Perhaps they were even secretly engaged, waiting until he had sufficient means to marry, or until, as Justin had suggested, Monica Clutton should die. And, after all, she knew little or nothing about Peter's private affairs; he had scarcely spoken of them to her except in vague, general terms. It was only after he had gone away that she wished she had known a little more, so as to be able to picture him in his home surroundings.

And surely it was only natural that there should be a woman in his life, older than herself, perhaps, and not very beautiful, but grave, dignified, experienced, and full of fervor. A wise, deeply-devoted woman such as he had pictured in "Until the Harvest," one who could counsel, encourage, and understand. Not — not a little, inexperienced, timid girl whom he regarded almost as a child.

When Justin spoke of Peter in this intimate way, with a knowledge of him that dated back for many years, Averil felt more and more as if Clutton were removed from her completely and utterly. She had only stepped into his path just once, for a very few days. Yes, it had been a dream, as the princess had said, a dream such as nearly all girls have, and which could never come to anything.

"What I wanted to tell you then — what I want to tell you now — are one and the same thing — I love you."

The words echoed in her ears just as if they had been actually spoken. Did they, too, form part of that dream which had taken the brightness from the day of her youth?

"I suppose there was nothing about Aspoli in the new book?" said Justin presently. "It's too soon for him to have used the copy he was hunting for so eagerly while he was there."

Averil said in a very steady, careful tone:

"There was nothing whatever about Aspoli."

"We must look out for that in the next. Who knows but what we shall find ourselves charmingly portrayed? That's the worst of authors — you never know if they are liking you for your own sweet self or for some ulterior purpose connected with their work."

The destruction of the fabric was now complete, but even Justin could not know how great were the

havoc and ruin he had perpetrated. It was not quite a shot at a venture, for he thought the mark might very well be there, and in any case it was worth trying for.

"You of course won't mind if you find you've been put under the microscope for so good a cause," he added. "Peter is sure to be kind in his delineation."

"There's nothing interesting enough about me to put into a book," said Averil, with a brave effort to conceal her pain.

He must never know that his words had hurt her. But in her mind there was a dreadful little fear that he had guessed her secret even as the princess had guessed it.

She rose restlessly and went to the window, looking out at the steel-blue lake that lay so deep in its basin that the sunlight scarcely seemed to touch it. But on the groups of silver olive-trees the golden rays rested as if eagerly. Through the open window they could hear a boy's voice singing down there by the lake.

"Won't you come out?" he said, coming and standing by her side.

She shook her head.

"I can't. I'm waiting for the doctor — he is very late to-day."

"You think of nothing but the princess," he said, with sudden irritation.

"Isn't it natural that I should think of her? Nadine's been everything to me."

"Since when have you begun to call her Nadine? Isn't that rather ridiculous when she's so much older than you? Old enough to be your mother, with something to spare!"

His old jealousy had been violently aroused during that conversation at luncheon, and his irritability

was liable, in consequence, to betray itself at the smallest trifle.

Even Averil was surprised at this display of petulance, which seemed so unreasonable.

"I'm glad — I'm proud to call her Nadine," she told him.

"I hope she will have the tact to leave us in peace when we are married," he said.

It was a rash and venturesome speech.

"She must come whenever she likes," said Averil firmly. "I owe her a great deal."

"I don't like these adopted relations. They're always more exigent and possessive than real parents."

"You must remember that but for her we should not be engaged. I should be living in Florence by myself."

It was true and he knew it, and how greatly he was indebted to her for his engagement he knew, perhaps, better than Averil did.

"Well, you might come out till the doctor does come," he said.

"Oh, no; I might not hear him. I really can't come with you, Justin."

"Oh, well, I suppose I must console myself that in about three weeks now we shall be married," he said.

Averil started and colored.

"Oh, no, Justin; that is impossible. I'm not going to leave Nadine until she's quite well. I've told her so. You mustn't ask me to do such a thing as that."

"Do you mean to say you are going to postpone our wedding because of her illness?"

"I don't mean to leave Nadine until she's well. Even if she does get better, it will be slow and tedious." She was very pale now, but her voice was

steady. "I really can't talk of our wedding, Justin, while she's so ill."

"Most women," he said, with bitterness, "when they are engaged, think only of the man they are going to marry."

"I suppose I must be different then from other women," she said, with a little faint ghost of a smile.

Justin felt that he had been too hasty. He was a little ashamed of the jealousy which had prompted him to make those unwise speeches during luncheon. His soreness at being relegated to a secondary place on account of the princess' illness had contributed a good deal to his ill-humor. He felt himself badly treated, and, indeed, there was something to be said for him.

Averil's nerves were also on edge, for she had had very little sleep last night and Justin's unexpected arrival had been decidedly inopportune. She disliked having to entertain him through a long meal, which, she felt, he was purposely trying to make as long as possible in order to detain her near him.

He said in a penitent tone:

"Don't let's quarrel, Averil. Quarreling's too bitter when one can't kiss and make friends."

She drew a little away. To kiss him would make him happy and would make amends and reparation, too, but to-day it was more than ever impossible. So she only said quietly:

"No, we won't quarrel, Justin."

They sat there almost in silence. It was difficult for him to talk to her because he could see that her thoughts were otherwise occupied. The doctor had not yet come, and she would break off a remark in order to listen, thinking perhaps that she had heard an approaching car. He was determined not to show himself irritated and annoyed by her anxiety

and preoccupation, but he felt that it was a little exaggerated. It was barely six months since Averil had taken up her abode at the Villa Magnolia, and now the princess occupied the foremost place in her thoughts, even to his own detriment.

At last the doctor arrived and Averil got up and went away, leaving Justin alone. He wondered how long she would be gone. Something of the nervous tension which invariably takes possession of a house where there is serious illness again communicated itself to him. He began in a measure to share Averil's anxiety and to feel for the first time that the outcome might be fatal. He would have given worlds for her to return and tell him what was passing.

He lit a cigarette and wandered out onto the terrace. It was very still and the afternoon was a fine one. The whole scene seemed to be painted in tones of gold and blue; the effects of those autumn tints on the trees were really wonderful; they looked almost as if a golden film of gossamer had been cast over them. But he was too restless to remain outside, and Averil might not find him if she returned. He went back to the house and sat down again, looking idly at some illustrated papers that were lying about.

At last he heard approaching footsteps and looked up, expecting to see Averil. But it was only the nurse. She came toward him.

"Miss Waring has asked me to come and tell you that she can't leave the princess. She thought you would prefer to know in case you wanted to return to Rome."

"How is the princess to-day?" he asked.

The nurse looked at him gravely, and in her face, suddenly set into firm, rather hard lines, he observed that look of secret and professional reticence

so often adopted by women in her position when confronted with questions.

Seeing that he was waiting anxiously and eagerly for a reply, she said in a guarded tone:

"She is not quite so well to-day. The doctor is going to try a new treatment."

"Don't you think Miss Waring could come for a moment?" he persisted.

The nurse repeated gravely:

"She can not leave the princess."

His heart sank at this fresh frustration. Oh, why had he not been more patient and kind during the time they had spent together?

"Is there — danger?" he demanded, conscious that the tension was increasing.

"There is no immediate danger."

She moved away.

"Oh, don't go, please," said Justin. "I mean — can't you tell me anything more?"

"There is really nothing to tell you, Mr. Mellor. I must go back to my patient; she will be wanting me."

"Then will you tell Miss Waring that I am very sorry not to see her again? Say I will go back to Rome now, and come again in the morning."

"I think that will be best. I am sure Miss Waring is not likely to leave the sick-room again to-day. Even if you stayed, I am afraid there would be no chance of your seeing her. We want her to rest whenever it is possible."

"I am sorry not to see her for a moment," he said again.

He wished that the nurse were not in such a hurry to leave him. Anything was better than eating out his heart in this solitude with Averil so near and yet so obstinately invisible. And from what the nurse had said, he had gathered that Averil wished him

to return to Rome. In that at least he could please her. Perhaps it disturbed her to think of him waiting there alone. Still — she might have come, if only to say good-by to him. It would have meant at least the touch of her hand.

As he was on his way back to Rome, motoring swiftly through those golden autumn ways of the Campagna, a sudden and swift storm overtook him. The little clouds which had been gathering on the horizon had advanced and darkened. There were peals of thunder that almost deafened him, and forked serpents of lightning ripped the black clouds asunder as if they had been torn with fiery knives. Deluges of rain fell, and the little streams and brooks that watered the Campagna were transformed into miniature torrents.

When he looked back he could not see the hills he had left behind him; they were completely obscured by those impenetrable clouds that had drawn dark, swathing curtains over them.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN AVERIL heard the motor pass down the avenue to the highroad below she crept quietly out of the princess' room and went back to the *salotto*. It was such a relief to feel that he had really gone and to know that for the rest of the day she could come and go as she would without fear of meeting him or of being detained by him. He had told the nurse that he would return to-morrow, but in the meantime she could count upon a few quiet hours.

Presently the storm beat against the house deafeningly. Averil watched it half in fear; she thought

it was the most terrible storm she had ever seen, and here on the hills one felt the full force of it. The lake had turned to a dull, steel-gray color, and for the first time it seemed to her to possess a sinister and terrible aspect, as if it had been the venue of countless tragedies. Generally it looked cold and lifeless, even on the fairest of summer days, because it lay so deep down in its basin that the sunlight scarcely ever touched it. But until to-day it had never looked sinister and cruel as it did now.

The autumn leaves torn from the trees were whirling along the terrace; the tall, slim spires of the cypresses were swaying violently in the gale. Overhead the thunder crashed and roared and the dark clouds were split by the lightning, that seemed to her like some fierce and fiery messenger. A numb, cold feeling took possession of Averil; she crouched in a little heap on the sofa, gazing with eyes at once fascinated and terrified upon the scene without.

She was tired, too, and her head was aching, but her body felt oddly light and thin and full of activity. All the afternoon she had been helping the nurse, obeying her readily and skilfully. It had been so much easier to act and to work in this way than to sit there talking idly to Justin. But it had been painful, too, for the princess had only spoken to her once and then she had called her Olga. That was the name of her own daughter who had died. Perhaps her thoughts were back in those far-off Russian days.

"Will you come back, please? She is asking for you, Miss Waring."

It was Nurse Davis who had come to call her. But why was she there? It was not time for her yet to go on duty. Averil sprang up in alarm.

"How is she? How is she?"

Nurse Davis looked at her with compassion. She was a handsome woman of about thirty-five, dark, capable-looking, with an air of experience. She was sorry for Averil, because of what the future must now inevitably hold for her. She had discerned, too, that the girl was not at all happy in her engagement.

"There's no change since the morning. But it's a critical case, as I'm sure you must see for yourself."

Averil's lips trembled.

"Of course, I've been afraid — oh, ever since she was first taken ill! But when you say that, it makes it seem worse. I have prayed a great deal — I've begged God not to take her from me."

She followed the nurse down the passage. At the door Nurse Davis stopped.

"You're not to let her see that you're frightened and anxious," she said in a sharp, bracing tone, exactly as if she were speaking to a child.

"Of course I won't. You can trust me," said Averil proudly.

She followed her into the room. The princess was lying there very white and still, but her eyes were open; she was quite conscious, and she smiled as Averil approached her.

"Darling Averil," she murmured.

The girl sat down by her side. Darkness had come early to-day on account of the storm and already the lamp was lighted and placed away from the bed in its accustomed corner. Averil could only just discern the strangely shrunken features, the parched, dry lips, the feverishly bright eyes.

"Averil, are we alone? I want to be alone with you."

"No; the nurses are both here," whispered Averil.

"Tell them to go away. Tell them I want to speak to you alone."

Averil crossed the room and gave the message, and the two women withdrew, but not without a warning word from Nurse Davis.

"Mind, you're not to talk long, and don't let her tire herself. She *must* keep as quiet as possible, or we shall have her delirious again to-night."

She said this almost severely.

"Oh, I won't let her talk much. But she seems to want to say something to me."

"If I had my own way, you shouldn't go into the room at all," said Nurse Davis.

Averil closed the door softly and then went back to the bedside. Nurse Davis had thoroughly frightened her. She knew that she had not meant to be at all unkind, but she was thinking of her patient's welfare and could not have much consideration for any one else.

"They have gone now," she whispered to the princess. "What was it you were going to say to me?"

"I have felt to-day as if I wasn't going to get better," she said in a very weak and feeble voice. "And it has been a consolation to me to feel that if I die I can do so in peace."

"You mustn't speak of dying — of leaving me," said Averil, forcing back the tears. "I love you so much it would break my heart if you were to die."

"I hope you would not feel too lonely. You will go to another happiness — a much greater happiness. I shall leave you with — with Justin."

The long violet eyes sought hers wistfully.

"It comforts me to feel that your future is so happily settled. You will have a good man's love — a good man's care."

Averil laid her hand suddenly on hers.

"Don't speak of it! Don't speak of it!" she said passionately, and forgetting all Nurse Davis' warnings in the emotion of the moment.

Her heart sank at the thought of that future spent wholly with Justin.

"You are quite, *quite* happy about it, darling Averil? You have never felt again that you were making a mistake?"

"I am not very happy. But don't let's speak of that, Nadine darling. I'm thinking of you. You *must* get better — you mustn't leave me."

But the princess persisted.

"Is it on Justin's account that you are not happy?"

"Yes. I have never cared for him. When he went away I felt so relieved — so *free*."

She uttered the word with a violent emphasis.

"You haven't told him? You haven't said anything to Justin?"

"No, but I am sure he must have guessed. I told him we couldn't be married as long as you were ill. He was angry because I didn't put him first."

"I thought if anything happened to me it would be better for you to marry Justin. But perhaps it was wrong of me to interfere, to play Providence." She closed her eyes wearily. Averil made a movement as if to leave her; she was sure Nurse Davis would think she had talked long enough. Besides, the conversation was an agitating one. Averil felt torn in two by her wish not to agitate her and her strong conviction that it would be wrong to deceive her about Justin.

"No, don't go, Averil. I'm thinking of you."

Averil sat there in silence. Outside the storm had ceased, but the gale was blowing wildly around

the old house, making the casements and wooden shutters rattle.

"Don't you mean to marry him, after all, Averil?"

"I have thought sometimes lately that I must break off our engagement. I can never care for him. And I've learned now beyond all doubt that I love Peter — that I can't forget him. Once, before he left Aspoli, he told me that if I ever wanted him he would come back."

"Did he say that?" said the princess.

Her eyes, strangely dull and lightless, sought Averil's.

"Dear Averil — I think and believe you are making a great mistake, throwing away the substance for the shadow."

"Yes, only I must learn to forget the shadow. But you think, too, it would be wrong to go on with this marriage when I love Peter? Even if my love for him is only a girl's foolish dream, as you once said? Twice Justin has kissed me, and each time I have felt that I was wronging Peter." She bowed her head. "He ought to have had my first and my last kisses."

"Averil — you are making a mistake in caring so much for this man, who never loved you at all."

"But I am not even certain of that," said Averil proudly.

The princess closed her eyes wearily as if the conversation had exhausted her.

"You must tell Justin — it isn't fair to keep the truth from him. He must know."

Averil kissed her.

"I mustn't stay with you any more now. You know Nurse Davis doesn't like you to talk too long."

"But you must come back. I miss you when you stay away too long. Darling Averil — I've done

my best, haven't I? You don't blame me for anything that's happened?"

"Blame you? When you've made me so happy? I blame myself for being so foolish — such a trouble to you."

She crept out of the room. Nurse Davis eyed her as she passed down the passage but made no comment.

When she reached her own room her first action was to sit down and write out a telegram to be sent to Justin the first thing in the morning. It ran as follows:

"Please don't come to-day. The princess is very ill and I couldn't see you. AVERIL."

Let him think her unkind if he would. Of course, she had been very much to blame, and even now it was wrong of her not to tell him the truth. But she was afraid that he would come immediately if she did that and expostulate and remonstrate with her for her perfidy. It was impossible to risk such a scene as that might prove to be. Her nerves were strung to such a pitch already that she felt she could not bear any more.

The days that followed were very terrible to those who watched so ceaselessly by the bedside of Princess Nadine. Because her temperature had risen alarmingly it had been decided to give her iced baths. This was done, and it caused her suffering. She seemed to be in great dread of it, and she shrank from the nurses, and even from Averil, when they approached her, with a look of terror in her eyes. It was the look of a child or a dog who is aware that pain is going to be inflicted by stronger forces from whom there is no escape.

Averil sat by the bedside fanning her almost ceaselessly. The weather in those early days of No-

vember had become curiously sultry; it was the belated summer of St. Martin.

The doctor looked increasingly grave; he came more often and stayed longer. Once a great specialist with a European reputation came out from Rome. Although they did not tell her so in so many words, Averil knew that the illness was approaching a dangerous and critical climax.

One evening, just after the doctor's visit, the princess opened her eyes and said:

"Averil, are you there? I can't see you."

Averil touched her hand.

"Yes, I'm here, Nadine," she said, making her voice hard and steady.

"Don't go away. I want you to stay with me."

"I promise not to leave you."

She watched beside her and saw that very soon she fell asleep. Her breathing, though irregular, was quiet enough. Toward dawn there was a change, so sudden that Averil did not at first grasp what it meant. She had been drowsy and half asleep from her long vigil when Nurse Davis touched her sharply on the shoulder.

"She's going," she said abruptly.

The princess died without regaining consciousness. It was a sudden failure of the heart's action.

This was the news that met Justin when, filled with fear and foreboding, he motored out on the following morning. He did not see Averil, for she was in bed, and Nurse Davis told him that she must not be disturbed. On this point she was firm and decided, as she always was when it was a question of her patient. And she regarded Averil as her patient now.

"I've given her a sleeping-draught to quiet her," she said. "She was terribly upset last night."

He went into the princess' room and saw her lying

there still and white as a statue, with her beautiful features very tranquil and composed. She looked very young, despite her white hair. There was genuine sorrow in Justin's heart as he stood looking at her. After all, she had been his friend; it was through her that he had won Averil. And she had loved and befriended Averil when she was left alone. He owed her a great deal of gratitude and he was sorry that he had allowed himself to be jealous of her influence over the girl.

But again he had to go away without seeing Averil.

CHAPTER XXVI

AVERIL's grief was violent, and she was thoroughly over-done and exhausted and needed both care and attention. She was too ill to go to the funeral, which took place in Rome a few days later. Justin attended it, and both the nurses were there, and a few people who had known the princess when she visited Rome from time to time, as she had been in the habit of doing. There were Russians as well as English, and a few Italians, but no member of her own family could arrive in time to attend that last ceremony. Notice of her death had, however, been sent to Lord Westingham, and some days later the family lawyer journeyed out to Italy to see about her property in that country. The will, which was a recent one, was read, and it was discovered that almost all of her property and her own personal fortune had been left to Averil, her "dear adopted daughter." The Villa Magnolia and its contents and nearly all the money she possessed, which amounted to a very large sum, were bequeathed to Averil Waring. She was to have complete control over it when she came of age. Until

then the income was to be paid to her by the trustees. She was to inherit also all the jewelry excepting only a string of pearls that had always been in the Westingham family; these she was to take home herself as soon as the journey could conveniently be made and give in person to Lady Ann Cheverton, to whom they were bequeathed.

Averil listened to all this with a blank look of suffering on her face. She scarcely seemed to realize or appreciate the change in her own circumstances. She had once been poor, with scarcely enough to live upon, and now she was very rich indeed. That splendid villa at Aspoli, a princely abode with all its fine furniture, its china, its wonderful delicate embroideries and tapestries, belonged to her. But she was alone and very, very miserable; her mother was dead, and now she had lost her darling friend who had always been kind to her; she felt as if she did not want all those possessions, but only to go away somewhere where she could hide herself and her grief.

The doctor came occasionally to see her. After one of these visits he said to Nurse Davis:

"I hope you are going to remain with the Signorina for the present. She needs your care and, above all, your companionship. She must not be alone."

"Oh, yes; I'm staying on," replied Nurse Davis cheerfully. "The other nurse had to go back to Rome for a case, but I have no intention of leaving Miss Waring unless she turns me out, which isn't likely. She's used to me, and I think she likes me."

And she stood up, squaring her strong shoulders and looking very capable and determined.

"She's like a child," she continued, "and I scold her just as if she were one. It's wonderful how she bears it, but she's very good really."

"I heard she was engaged to be married," said the doctor. "Of course, that's the best thing that could happen to her. I hope she won't put it off on account of her mourning. The sooner she has a husband to comfort her, the better."

Nurse Davis looked a trifle skeptical.

"I'm not at all sure whether Mr. Mellor is the right person to comfort her," she said. "Up till the present moment she has utterly refused to see him. He's been out here almost every day, and each day I've had to send him away without seeing her."

Averil's resolute refusal to see Justin had impressed the nurse rather disagreeably. Day after day he had come out in all weathers to the villa, and day after day he had been refused admission. Sometimes he had been humble and pleading — that was at first, when there was a tangible reason for sending him away; sometimes he had been impatient, angry, and suspicious, as if there were some plot on foot to keep him from seeing Averil. Nurse Davis had had to deal with him in all these moods, and she had inspired Justin with a wholesome respect, almost amounting to awe, for the sharpness of her tongue. But she did not like the business; there was something behind it all which she did not understand. She had once even tried to prevail upon Averil to see him, but the girl became almost hysterical at the bare suggestion.

"The marriage should take place as soon as possible," said the doctor. "She has had a great grief, and a shock, too, and it would help her to forget it a little."

Nurse Davis shook her head.

"I don't believe she means to marry him," she said.

"But the princess was very anxious that she

should. She told me all about it, and how providential it had been that the young man should fall in love with her. It relieved her of all anxiety about her future. You must exert your influence with her to persuade her not to keep him waiting too long."

Nurse Davis smiled, but offered no further comment. Averil might be good and obedient and submissive when it was a question of keeping her in bed and making her take food and medicine at regular intervals, but she doubted if even her influence would be of any practical use to Justin then. The girl refused to discuss her engagement and was obstinately reticent about it. But she was certainly planning something, and Nurse Davis could not in the least guess what it was.

It was about a fortnight after the princess' death, and Averil, though still weak and ill, was able to sit up or lie on the sofa for a few hours every day. When the weather was fine enough she was taken out onto the terrace overlooking the lake, but she always preferred to remain indoors, and Nurse Davis wondered if it were because she was afraid of Justin's coming and finding her there.

One evening, however, she went into her room and found that Averil had not gone to bed as usual. She had collected a number of things, clothes, hats, books, writing materials, and photographs, and had laid them out on the tables and on the bed as if she were preparing to pack them. This strange energy was in curious contrast to her conduct all day, which had alternated between violent fits of crying and a silent, lethargic apathy which had totally prevented her from following any occupation at all. She had lain on the sofa nearly all day with her rosary twisted between her fingers, but she did not seem to be praying. Any change from this mood was to be wel-

comed, still Nurse Davis could not help feeling surprised.

"I am not going to have my dinner in bed to-night," said Averil. "I shall have it in the dining-room with you."

"You should ask permission. I'm not at all sure that you ought to stay up any longer," said the nurse.

But Averil came toward her with her hands full of things.

"You mustn't be angry," she said. "I really want your help, but I've made up my mind to have my own way."

There was a touch of rebellion in her voice.

"Oh, have you?" said Nurse Davis, a little grimly.

She looked at Averil with stern disapproval in her dark brown eyes. Her eyebrows were black and very broad, and when she drew them together, as she was doing now, she looked rather formidable.

"If that's your idea," she said, "the sooner I go back to Rome, the better. I've been a pretty faithful watch-dog all these days, haven't I? But now I think I'd better leave you to Mr. Mellor."

Averil turned white to the lips.

"Oh, it's because of Mr. Mellor that I want your help so much! You mustn't refuse me—you really mustn't. I haven't got any friends, and I was sure that when you knew you would be kind and help me."

But she looked scared and frightened. Nurse Davis was quickly mollified.

"Look here," she said. "You just put down those things and tell me what's in your head. If I'm to help you, you're not to go plotting things behind my back. I insist upon knowing what you're going to do."

Averil was by this time quite accustomed to Nurse Davis's firm and severe way of speaking to her. It was, indeed, rather a relief sometimes to be ordered about and scolded just as if she were a child, and, on the whole, she knew that she had been very submissive.

"Oh, I'll tell you," she said eagerly. "I promise to tell you, but you mustn't be cross and scold me."

She looked so pretty standing there, flushed and eager, that Nurse Davis actually smiled and the frown vanished from her broad, black eyebrows.

"Can you keep a secret?" Averil asked at last.

"That depends on the secret," said Nurse Davis. "I'm not fond of them as a rule. Nasty, under-hand things!"

Averil paused and looked at her. Nurse Davis had been extremely kind to her, and although she was often sharp and authoritative, the girl had never resented it. She thought her very capable and competent and trustworthy, with a lot of energy and common sense. She was blunt in speech and spoke her mind, as the saying goes, but she was experienced and was a thorough woman of the world.

Averil slipped over to her side. In the plain black wrapper she was wearing she looked extremely young and curiously, brilliantly fair, with her pale face and frosty yellow hair. She was changed and excited to-night and her gray eyes were very bright.

"Dear Nurse Davis, I want you to help me to do something very rash."

She put her hands on her shoulders and then timidly but impulsively kissed her. Nurse Davis was not at all a demonstrative woman, but in her heart she was very fond of Averil and the spontaneous embrace pleased her. So many people never got

beyond the fear which she was so accustomed to inspiring.

"Well, what is it, Miss Waring?"

"I'm going to England," said Averil, "and I want you to go with me. I'm not used to traveling and I've never been out of Italy in my life, so I should be afraid to go alone. Will you come with me?"

She clasped her hands and assumed an attitude of entreaty.

"I really don't know. I shall have to know much more about it first. What do you want to go to England for, in the first place?"

"I've never been there. But it's my own country — I want to see it."

"You'd better get your husband to take you there when you are married," said Nurse Davis dryly.

"If I wait till then I may have to wait a long time," said Averil in a constrained tone.

"Now will you tell me just what you mean by saying that? I tell you I must have your full confidence or I won't help you," said Nurse Davis.

She looked at Averil severely with hard, shrewd eyes.

"Does Mr. Mellor know of this wonderful plan?" she asked as Averil was silent.

Averil flushed.

"Oh, don't you see it's *because* of him I'm making it?" she said.

"Because of him? That wants explaining, too," said Nurse Davis, with a frown.

"He isn't to know anything about it," said Averil hastily. "I don't mean to tell him. That's where the secret comes in. You mustn't betray me. But if you turn against me and tell him, I shall find another way. I want to leave here to-morrow very

early and take the morning express from Rome. It goes at nine o'clock."

She slipped onto her knees at Nurse Davis's feet.

"Oh, you must help me! I shall never have the courage to do it all alone. The lawyer has given me a whole heap of money to go on with, and he said when I had spent it, there was plenty more. But what's the use of being rich and free if I can't do as I like — go where I like?"

"You've hardly told me anything yet. Why do you want to go away like this without telling Mr. Mellor? It isn't fair to him, and he's very devoted to you."

"I don't want to marry him," said Averil desperately.

"And is there some one in England whom you do want to marry?" inquired Nurse Davis dryly.

"How could there be?" said Averil, suddenly on her guard. "I know hardly any one in England. I have only one friend there, and it isn't likely we should meet each other. But I want to take Nadine's pearls and give them to Lady Ann."

"But why this desperate hurry?"

"Because when we have once got away in safety I shall write and explain to Mr. Mellor that I can't marry him."

"Is this the truth?" asked Nurse Davis.

"Yes," said Averil.

"Do you know it's a serious thing to break off your engagement? You've been engaged to this man for ever so long. Why have you only just discovered it's a mistake?"

"I never wanted to marry him," said Averil.

"It doesn't do a girl any good to break off her engagement. People always say that she's behaved badly."

"There's no one to say it except Mr. Mellor,

and perhaps Miss Wilkinson and Mrs. Minchin."

"But why can't you stay here quietly and tell him so without running away? It's cowardly and unfair and a lot of other things," said Nurse Davis.

"I've never cared for him; he knows that as well as possible. But he wished it very much, and my darling Nadine approved. It's since her illness I knew I couldn't go on with it." She paused a moment. "Won't you help me? I do want to go so very, very much!"

"I don't approve and I don't like it. You ought to ask advice. You won't listen to me and you're as obstinate as a mule. I don't want to help you to cut your own throat in this way, and that's the truth."

"You'd rather I stayed and married a man I almost hate?"

"Yes. I think it's better than being dishonorable and cowardly. What will he think? He'll believe that you only accepted him because of his money, and that you've thrown him over the moment you had some of your own."

"He must think what he likes," said Averil; "but I've never deceived him — he knows I have never cared for him. He said I should learn to, but I don't believe one can ever *learn* to love any one. At any rate, I won't take the risk!" She threw back her head and looked defiantly at Nurse Davis. "Well, what are you going to do? Are you coming with me to-morrow morning or are you going to let me go alone to England?"

"Perhaps I shall not let you go at all. What if I told Mr. Mellor about this mad plan?"

"Oh, you wouldn't be so cruel! He must never, never know until I'm ever so far away," said Averil.

Nurse Davis hesitated, but she saw that it would be quite useless to oppose Averil any further. It

would only add fresh complications to a situation that was already very difficult. But she was sorry for Justin, and she felt that he might, with sufficient cause, attribute something of the blame to her.

"Very well; I will go with you," she said at last. "But unless you have a good night and get plenty of sleep you shan't start in the morning. That at least is my business, so I advise you to go to bed at once."

"Very well," said Averil meekly. "But what about the packing? Gemma can take our things back to the Villa Magnolia, but I shall want at least one box with me."

"I'll see to that if you'll tell me what you want to take," said Nurse Davis. "I hope you've got a thick coat. It'll be very cold in England at this time of year — much colder than it is here. You'll want lots of warm things."

"We can get them in Paris," said Averil. "I think I've got everything I'm likely to want for the journey. We had our winter things sent from Aspoli when we came here, because the princess was afraid of feeling the cold."

She undressed and went to bed, and although she was far too much excited to eat her dinner, she managed to swallow enough hot soup to satisfy Nurse Davis, who stood near her in a threatening attitude till it was finished. She made her drink a little wine, and then she said:

"Well, good night. I'm afraid I'm going to help you to do a very wrong and stupid thing, and I hate being an accessory to such a fool plan."

With these words she left the room. But her bark was worse than her bite, and with the help of Gemma she finished all the preparations for their early start before she herself went to bed. Gemma and one of the older servants from the Villa Magnolia were to return to Aspoli on the following day

with the bulk of the things. The lawyer was still down there and he was making arrangements to let the house for the winter, as Averil had agreed to this proposal. She could not take possession of it until she came of age, and so it was considered wiser to let it for the winter and spring.

Fortunately for Averil, Nurse Davis was an experienced traveler, for she had very often gone abroad with her richer patients. She did not fully exonerate herself from being party to Averil's plan, but at the same time she saw that it would be far better to accompany her than to let her travel alone. She had never traveled alone nor been out of Italy in her life and she had nowhere to go on her arrival in England. She was far too young and pretty to stay about at hotels alone. Whether it was right or wrong of her to go at all was a question which, after all, she must settle for herself. Nurse Davis had nothing to do with that side of the matter, although she had said pretty forcibly what she felt about it. Now she must think only of Averil's safety and physical well-being. Under the circumstances there was no doubt that a change would be extremely beneficial to her health and spirits. It was significant that this was the first night since the princess' death that she had not cried herself to sleep..

They arrived in Rome in good time on the following day, and took their seats in the train. Averil was wildly excited, partly because she was thoroughly nervous lest Justin should somehow have learned of her impending departure. She had long ago decided that she could not possibly risk a final scene of parting with him. She would write, but she could not possibly see him. Although it was so early when they drove through the streets, golden in the autumn sunshine, she was terrified lest by some ill-chance they should see him. But as the train

moved out of the station she leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. It was such a relief to feel that they were really on their way to England.

They were to go straight through to Paris, but at the frontier Averil wrote and posted a letter to Justin. It was not an easy letter to write, and she made several attempts before she finished one that quite satisfied her. She must make her meaning perfectly clear, and yet she did not want to hurt his feelings more than was necessary.

When it was done it ran as follows:

"DEAR JUSTIN:

"I am sure you must often have thought lately that I did not care for you, and, indeed, I have been very unhappy about it and did not know how to tell you the truth. I am sorry, but it is impossible for me to marry you, and so I am leaving Italy, and Nurse Davis is traveling with me. She will look after me. I hope you won't think too badly of me, but I am sure you will see it is the only thing for me to do. Please do not try to find me.

"Yours sincerely,

"AVERIL WARING."

"There, you'd better give it to me," said Nurse Davis, "or there won't be time to post it. Not changing your mind again, are you?" she inquired, as Averil hesitated.

Averil closed the envelope and thrust the letter into Nurse Davis's hand.

"You promise faithfully that you'll post it?" she said anxiously.

"Oh, yes, I promise. I may as well do my job thoroughly," replied Nurse Davis.

CHAPTER XXVII

AMONG the princess' private papers there had been a letter addressed to Averil, in which she told her of the provision she had made for her in her will. It was a long letter, very tender and affectionate and full of thought and solicitude for her future. Of course, when she had written it she had done so in the belief that Averil would soon be married to Justin, and there were allusions to him in the letter, which had actually been written very soon after Averil's engagement had definitely taken place, and before they had left Rome for the villa in the hills.

Inside the letter was a second one addressed to her brother, the Earl of Westingham, marked, "For Averil to take when she goes to England with the pearls after my death." Averil had not told the lawyer of this letter; she had not seen any necessity for doing so, but it had very largely influenced in her the great desire to go to England, and it had also given her a particular purpose for making the journey. Perhaps it was, indeed, the finding of this letter which had first suggested the project to her mind. It was not the sudden decision which Nurse Davis had supposed; it was the materialization of a plan that had been evolving in her brain since the first days of her bereavement. That it also provided her with a way of escape made her all the more eager to carry it out as soon as possible.

On her way to England she sometimes wondered if Lord Westingham would take any notice of the letter or of her. She had known that the princess did not correspond with any of her relations; she had not been on good terms with them, although Averil did not know the exact reason. She guessed

it must have something to do with that mysterious past to which Mrs. Minchin and Miss Wilkinson had alluded. These things were no concern of hers. What interested her chiefly about Lord Westingham was the fact that he was the father of Lady Ann Cheverton, who was Peter's friend. And in the back of her mind she always had the hope, or the fear — she could not quite tell which it was — that in England she might hear news of Peter, or, perhaps, even see him again.

If he had really wished for her marriage with Justin he would blame her for breaking off her engagement; perhaps he would think that she had behaved badly and dishonorably. It was a terrible thing to break one's word, and, looking back now, she saw that the motives which had originally persuaded her to accept Justin were not very lofty nor honorable ones. If she earned censure and blame, she perfectly realized that she had merited them. But she knew, too, that it would have been far more wrong to go on with a marriage that was loveless on her side. It was better to end it, and accept the punishment that the world would mete out to her.

Her first sight of London filled her with amazement. They arrived there just after dark one evening in November, for Nurse Davis had insisted upon her spending two or three days in Paris to buy the necessary warm clothes. Averil was wrapped in a long, black coat with a big collar and cuffs of black fur that set off her fair beauty to the utmost advantage. At Charing Cross several people turned their heads to look at her as she walked along the platform by the side of a dark, energetic-looking woman in nurse's uniform. The drive through the lighted streets was like the realization of a dream to Averil. All along Piccadilly she was astonished at

the brilliancy of the shop windows, at the air of opulence and wealth that prevailed, at the luxurious motors that passed, in which she caught glimpses of exquisitely dressed women with pale, expressionless faces; at the enormous and crowded motor-omnibuses grinding along weighed down by human freight. The pavements, too, were crowded with pedestrians, and at the corner of Bond Street a policeman held up his hand and the traffic stopped as if a dominating fairy had waved its peremptory wand. Their taxi turned up Bond Street, for Nurse Davis had decided that they should stay in a small, old-fashioned hotel in one of the quiet streets of Mayfair. Not for Averil were the crowded caravansaries affected by wealthy cosmopolitans. Nurse Davis had far too much experience of the world to make such a mistake as that. She engaged a couple of bedrooms and a sitting-room, and gave orders that all meals were to be served upstairs. And Averil meekly left all the arrangements to her. She had won her chief point, and she could afford to be docile and submissive in little things.

The energy and the decision of Nurse Davis had a bracing effect upon Averil. It roused her, a little roughly sometimes, but it helped her to conquer the apathy that had followed upon her grief.

In the days that followed — wonderfully mild for November in London — Nurse Davis took her sightseeing. She knew London very well, and she was careful not to tire her. They visited the Tower, Westminster Abbey, the National Gallery, and the South Kensington Museum and Wallace collection. Sometimes on fine afternoons they went for a drive in the Park, for which Averil hired an electric car. It was very pleasant and she liked the misty lilac effects, the pale sunlight lingering upon the sparse gold of the oak-trees; above all, she enjoyed

watching the people who were driving and walking there. It was such a wonderful new world to her.

One day Mr. Robinson called to see her and though she was at first delighted to see a face she knew, the interview did not prove to be a very pleasant one. He congratulated her in his old-fashioned, formal way upon her sudden accession to wealth, and then asked her whether any date had been fixed for her marriage.

"I'm not going to be married," said Averil, flushing a little.

"Do you mean to tell me your engagement has been broken off? Not by Mr. Mellor, surely?" exclaimed the old gentleman.

"I broke it off myself just before I left Italy," said Averil.

"Who advised you to do such a thing? My dear child — you must be out of your senses! I admit that this money has made a great change in your circumstances, but you need all the more some good, prudent man to look after your interests and yourself. You are far too young to be running about the world alone."

He put on his glasses and looked at Averil.

"Far too young," he repeated, quite angrily.

"And with all that money, too! It's an impossible position for you."

"But I'm not alone. I've got Nurse Davis with me. She helped to nurse the princess," said Averil in a low voice. "And she's been with me ever since."

"But you know nothing whatever about her, and she may be a very unprincipled, unscrupulous woman for all you know," he said fussily. "Dear me, how disastrous it all is, and just when I thought you were going to be so happily provided for! But you must remember that I am still your guardian for at least

another six months, and I shall have to see that you are properly looked after and chaperoned."

Averil was rather aghast when she heard this speech. But it was quite true; he was her guardian, and he had power to control her life until she came of age.

"Please, you mustn't bother about me," she said. "I'm enjoying London very much indeed at present — it's all so new to me. But I shall go back to Italy later on and then I shan't be any more trouble to you."

"Trouble to me? Of course you are, and will be, a great trouble to me as long as you remain unmarried," he said. "And as for a chaperon, I must see about such a thing at once."

"But you didn't make all this fuss when I was alone last year," said Averil innocently.

"There wasn't nearly so much cause for it. You weren't a great heiress then, and you looked different — more of a child. I suppose you've altered the way of doing your hair and that has changed you." He looked at her rather fixedly through his glasses. Of course, she was wonderfully changed, and he was obliged to admit to himself that the pretty child had developed into an extraordinarily beautiful woman. That plain black dress of hers would have been trying to most people, but she looked more than ever lily-like in that mournfully somber garb.

"I really don't know what to do about you," he said, "but I shall consult my friend Carless and see if he can suggest anything — he might know of a suitable person to chaperon you, although he does let his daughters go about just as they please without a soul to look after them. It's not the way I

bring up my own girls, but then his are no affair of mine."

Averil realized that, if he chose, he could dismiss Nurse Davis, and the thought filled her with a real dismay.

"But I really don't want any one but Nurse Davis," she said. "I'm used to her and she is really very kind. Won't you see her for yourself, Mr. Robinson? I should never have got away from Italy as I did if she hadn't helped me."

"That isn't much in her favor. I'm not sure that you ought to have left Italy at all without consulting me. You've behaved in a very high-handed way, breaking off your engagement and then rushing off to England like this!"

He was speaking to her exactly as if she were one of his own daughters, whom he was accustomed to admonish at infrequent intervals.

"But, you see," said Averil patiently, "I should have been obliged to come sooner or later. I've brought a letter for Lord Westingham, who was Princess Nadine's brother, as you know, and then there are the pearls for her niece, Lady Ann Cheverton."

Mr. Robinson was a little mollified to hear that she had really had some reason for acting as she had done.

"She wished you to make the acquaintance of her people. But I don't think you'll find them very friendly. The Westinghams aren't at all well off, and they won't like your having all the money."

"But why should they mind? They never knew her," said Averil. "And I was just like her daughter — she always said so."

"People are not very reasonable about such things. And blood is proverbially thicker than wa-

ter. I don't think you must look for much assistance from the Westinghams."

"But I don't want their assistance," said Averil, in a surprised tone. "I should like to see Lady Ann when I give her the pearls, and I hope she won't refuse to see me. As for Lord Westingham, I don't know at all what was in the letter, and I don't suppose he'll ever write to me.

"There is a son," said Mr. Robinson musingly; "a very charming young man, I am told. Yes — you might do worse than make friends with Lady Ann. I hope you will do your best to be agreeable to her if you do see her. Yes — yes — you might do a great deal worse than make friends with the Westingham family."

She was relieved when he finally took his departure. He did not see Nurse Davis, for when Averil went to look for her she was out; still, she felt that for the moment she was safe from any change of chaperon.

On Sunday she went to the great cathedral at Westminster, and was enchanted with its cool, gray gloom, its splendid if austere spaciousness, and the wonderful singing during High Mass. Nurse Davis accompanied her as usual; she was without any fixed beliefs, but was one of the immense number of persons who declare that "if there is a religion at all, it is the Roman Catholic." Thus she was without prejudices, and her interest in the proceedings made her a sympathetic companion.

All this time there had been no reply from Lady Ann, to whom Averil had written a timid little note begging her to come and see her, nor from Lord Westingham, to whom the princess' letter had been duly sent. She wondered if they had decided not to take any notice of her, and whether it would be as

well to forward the pearls to Lady Ann through Mr. Robinson. Still, she had been told expressly to deliver them in person, and this encouraged her to wait a little longer.

She had been in London about ten days when one afternoon a card was brought up to her and she was told that a lady wished to see her. It bore the name of Lady Ann Cheverton, and it sent a little thrill of excitement through her. There were two very strong reasons which made her desire intensely to see Lady Ann. One was because she was Nadine's own niece, and the other because she knew Peter Clutton and shared his interests in the poor of the East End.

She hoped, as well as feared, that she might mention Peter.

"Please ask her to come up," she said.

Averil had so often thought of Lady Ann that she felt almost as if she knew her quite intimately. She was not sure if she would prove a friend or an enemy, for Mr. Robinson had assured her that the Westinghams might not be too well pleased that she had inherited almost the whole of Princess Nadine's fortune, which had thus passed right out of the family. In spite of this, Averil had an intense and eager wish to see her. She was the woman who played a certain part in Peter's life — the woman, Justin had affirmed, that he would probably marry when Monica died, and of whom he held such an exalted opinion. It was strange that she should also be Nadine's niece, but the world is curiously full of such coincidences.

Her first glimpse of her showed her that Lady Ann was not at all the kind of woman she had expected to see. She was young, but she did not look young; one would have guessed her to be about thirty instead of only twenty-four. She was short,

with a thick figure; she wore glasses and was not at all good-looking. She was very plainly, even shabbily, dressed in black. There was not the slightest resemblance in her to the fine and delicate, almost haunting, beauty of Princess Nadine, who had retained to the last so much of her youth and loveliness. But Lady Ann had a kind face with honest brown eyes, which had the faithful expression of a large and mild dog's. She banished Averil's momentary nervousness by coming up quickly to her and taking her hand.

"I have been traveling about," she said, "and I only had your letter when I returned to town yesterday. I should have written, but I thought it would be better to come and see you, and I am so very glad to find you at home. But I was astonished to hear that you were in England. When did you arrive? I hope you did not come alone."

"I arrived about ten days ago," said Averil, "and Nurse Davis came with me and is remaining with me for the present. She was Princess Nadine's night-nurse, and she was so kind and attentive. Won't you sit down, please?"

If Averil had wished to see Lady Ann, it was certain that Lady Ann had also had a great curiosity to see Averil. It is true that the Westingham family in general were not disposed to be prejudiced in favor of this girl whom Nadine had adopted a few months before her death. This action had been regarded as a whim and caprice on her part, for she had long ago earned the character of being unreliable and impulsive among her English relations. But that she should, in dying, have bequeathed to her the whole of her ill-gotten fortune seemed to suggest that in those few months Averil had acquired an ascendancy and influence over her which was greatly to be deplored. On the face of it, it

looked as if something of the kind must certainly have happened. But Lady Ann had not accepted this view and she had borne no share in the family discussions and recriminations on the subject. Her father had expressed his views with a good deal of warmth and energy, and his elder daughters and his only son had been disposed to follow his opinion. But Lady Ann knew a good deal about Averil from quite another source, and she could not bring herself to think any harm of the girl. Peter Clutton had, on his return from Aspoli, given her a vivid and detailed account of Nadine's home and life there, its ordered beauty, its tranquility which he had found so refreshing. He had told her a little, though not a great deal, about Averil Waring herself. He had touched on the girl's youth and beauty; their devotion to each other, resembling that of a mother and only daughter, and of Averil's position in the little household. He had told her, too, something of the girl's simplicity and piety, and, much later on, he had informed her of her engagement to Justin Mellor. Although he made no comment, Lady Ann had felt that Peter did not approve of the engagement, and she concluded that he was not without misgiving as to the desirability of a mixed marriage for one so young and inexperienced. Of his own hurt and of his own destroyed hopes he had said nothing. That secret was locked safely within his own heart, in an abyss of pain and tenderness unfathomable and never to be revealed.

Lady Ann sat down. The light was falling on Averil's face and it was easy to see that Clutton's view of her had probably been the correct one. She *was* very young, and obviously a little shy and timid, and quite unconscious of her beauty, which was really enhanced by the dull somberness of her attire. It was absurd to suppose that this girl, who looked

so young, almost a child, could have gained an influence over any one except by her gentleness and simplicity.

"I want you to tell me about my aunt's death," said Lady Ann. "I never saw her, you know. She and my father were not on good terms, and I have heard so few particulars of her illness. But don't tell me if it hurts you too much to speak of it. I am sure you must have been very fond of each other."

Averil flushed and the tears came into her eyes. But, little by little, she told the story of those last weeks at the villa in the Roman hills to Lady Ann, who listened with an attentive sympathy. Once or twice she broke down and cried a little over the recital, and then Lady Ann took her hand and stroked and caressed it in a kind, motherly way which somehow reminded Averil of the princess.

But what struck Lady Ann very forcibly was that throughout the conversation there was not a single mention of Justin Mellor, nor did Averil once allude to her engagement. She wore no ring, and Lady Ann wondered a little if Peter had been mistaken about it.

"You know she left me everything except her pearls," said Averil. "She wrote a letter which I found after she was dead, asking me to give them to you because they had always belonged to your family. I have them here."

She went into her bedroom and returned presently with a large case of white leather, a little yellow and worn with age. Within, on a background of white velvet, were the famous pearls which Nadine Woronov had always worn.

"They are beautiful, aren't they?" said Averil. "She was very fond of them and always wore them."

"Yes — they are lovely," said Lady Ann, looking at them.

The Westinghams were not at all rich, and they had a great deal of landed property to keep up. The daughters' allowances and dowries were always very small, and Lady Ann, being the youngest, had even fewer jewels than her two sisters. The possession of the pearls meant a good deal to her. But she could see that it cost Averil nothing to give them up; she was evidently unaware of their great value.

"Shall you stay long in England?" inquired Lady Ann.

"I haven't made any plans. But the Villa Magnolia is to be let until I come of age, so I have no fixed home at present. And I don't want to go back to Aspoli."

She colored as she said this with a certain vehemence which mystified Lady Ann more than ever. Justin Mellor lived in Aspoli, and she wondered if Averil's wish to avoid the place was in any way connected with his presence there.

"You have plenty of money," said Lady Ann. "You can live pretty much where you like and how you like. I think you would find life in England very agreeable if you decided to settle here. You would soon make friends."

"I find it a little lonely just now," Averil confessed. "You see, I don't know any one in London except old Mr. Robinson, my guardian, and he generally scolds me when he comes — he thinks I am too independent."

They both laughed.

"It seems so odd to think that the Villa Magnolia belongs to me," continued Averil. "It is such a wonderful place, full of the most glorious treasures. I feel sometimes as if I had no right to it."

"But you have every right to it. I am sure my aunt was very fond of you."

"She was very, very kind to me," said Averil. "She was like my own mother, and we loved each other. But I wasn't a relation, and that makes me feel I have no right to it all."

"Oh, you mustn't think that," said Lady Ann hastily; "and I hope when you do go back to the Villa Magnolia you will let me come and stay with you."

"Oh, would you really come?" said Averil, delighted at this unexpected friendliness. "Of course I should love it if you would. It's such a big place for one girl!"

Lady Ann rose to go.

"Will you come down and stay with us at Westingham for a few days next week? My father would like to see you. I shall be going down myself on Monday, so if you come on Tuesday you will find me there. I generally take a holiday from Whitechapel about this time."

"I should like to come very much indeed," said Averil. "Where is Westingham?"

"It's in Dorsetshire, not very far from the sea. You can see the Channel from our windows. Perhaps you would like to bring Nurse Davis, and then she can tell my father about Aunt Nadine's illness."

"Yes — I would rather bring her. I've never traveled alone and I dread going about alone."

"And you are far too young, besides," said Lady Ann.

"I am not so very young. I shall be twenty-one next year."

"Yes, but you look such a baby," said Lady Ann, laughing.

When they parted she kissed Averil and said:

"You musn't be alarmed about coming, for, you see, I shall not be a stranger and every one will be very kind. My father asked me to tell you that he received your letter enclosing one from my aunt. He didn't write because he knew that I was coming to see you."

Her father's injunctions had been brief but to the point:

"If the girl's in any way presentable you can ask her to come down for a few days, and if she isn't, you can leave it alone. Otho will be here and one or two of his friends, so there'll be some young people for her."

CHAPTER XXVIII

NURSE DAVIS proved a tower of strength in the days that followed Lady Ann's visit. She had a considerable knowledge of the world, and she had frequently stayed professionally in great houses, and she knew exactly what Averil would require for her visit to Westingham. As she was in mourning, she must necessarily wear black, and she could have her dresses made as simply as she liked, for her tastes leaned still toward extreme simplicity. But it seemed to her that they were purchasing a limitless wardrobe, and she felt that she had already bought enough clothes in Paris and could not see the necessity for having any more. But Nurse Davis was firm. A neat suit of black serge and another of fine cloth were ordered at the tailor's; there was a black taffeta dress with a little coat, and another of charmeuse; there were evening dresses and tea-gowns, shoes and stockings, dainty rest gowns and blouses, and lace caps, and a hundred other trifles which Averil had never dreamed of possessing. Nurse

Davis engaged a competent maid to pack the trunks and to accompany them to Westingham. She refused anything for herself.

"I prefer to wear my uniform," she said bluntly.

It was a beautiful afternoon early in December when they arrived at Westingham. A luxurious motor met them at the station and they very soon came in sight of the great, rosy pile lying bathed in the pale sunshine. Far below a river glinted its way silverly through flat meadows, and beyond lay leafless woods with a warm, purple bloom upon them. Averil thought she had never seen so many and such green fields as she had seen on that journey down from London. The low-hanging, pale sky, with its wandering, fleecy clouds, the green fields set about with hedges or low walls, the cattle quietly grazing, the glimpses of little villages grouped round a church tower or spire, the country lanes where children played — all gave her an impression of peace and content as of a land where the people led happy and sheltered lives. It fascinated her the more because it was all so unfamiliar to her, although it was her own native land, where she had a right to be and to which she belonged. She fell to wondering why her mother had so persistently exiled herself from it, as people do sometimes, at first for reasons of health, and then from long habit.

The house, with its many wings and gables, stood on rising ground. The older part was almost entirely covered with dense ivy and Virginian creeper, with here and there a late-blossoming rose that had survived from the summer and was still flowering in that mild and soft climate. The mellowed red brick of which the house was built glowed in the sunlight. It all looked so immense that Averil wondered if she should ever find her way about in it.

Its size surprised her, for she had placed a literal meaning upon Mr. Robinson's speech about the poverty of the Westinghams, and it was difficult to associate this palatial house with the idea of poverty.

It was Averil's first experience of an English country house and she was astonished at the comfort and luxury that prevailed there. It was of the kind almost unknown in Italy, where the immense and sumptuous marble palaces seem to demand a certain austere and classic simplicity. Their very spaciousness forbids the kind of intimate comfort that is suited to northern lands and a colder climate. The silent, skilful, highly trained English servants were also a revelation to her; she had never met with such service, prompt, impersonal, almost automaton-like, and contributing to the ordered formality that prevailed there. She was far more afraid of the servants than she was of her host and hostesses.

Lord Westingham had been a widower for some years, and he had an only son, Lord Mendlesham, and four daughters. The eldest daughter was married, the next two lived at home and acted as hostesses for him, while Lady Ann — who from the time she became a Catholic had struck out a line of her own — after much strenuous opposition, had made her home for the greater part of the year in Whitechapel. She was her father's favorite and he had not liked parting with her.

Lord Westingham was a tall, spare man, who certainly possessed a likeness to his sister. His features, like hers, were well cut and modeled; he had the same dark, violet eyes, shaped rather long, but there the resemblance ceased. He had a cold, rather arrogant, manner, and his face was singularly stern, even a little harsh, and he greeted Averil with a certain abruptness that made her feel very shy.

His two daughters, Lady Betty and Lady Stella, were twins, and were very much alike and not at all like Lady Ann, who was the only dark one of the family. Although older, they looked younger than she did, for they were very fair, with delicate, small features, very blue eyes and auburn hair. They were extremely pretty, and Averil soon learned that they were both engaged to be married and that they were to have a double wedding early in the New Year.

Several young men were staying at Westingham for the shooting; they were for the most part Lord Mendlesham's friends and brother-officers, and from them all Averil received a certain amount of attention. She was an unknown girl of no particular family, and she had lived abroad in Italy all her life, so that she knew absolutely nothing of English ways, but she was very pretty and it was well known, too, that Princess Nadine, the "Black Sheep" of the Westingham family, had left her all her money, as well as an enormous villa near Naples. This little romance made Averil the object of deep interest. But she felt timid among so many strangers, and was really happier when she was alone with Lady Ann. The tall, smart English girls, mostly friends of Lady Betty and Lady Stella, alarmed her not a little. They talked and laughed a great deal, and were extremely self-possessed and amusing and gay. Every one knew every one else more or less intimately, and, besides, they had innumerable friends in common, whose sayings and doings were freely discussed. They took very little notice of Averil at all, and they made her feel dull. She knew none of the names they mentioned nor the incidents, scandalous or amusing, to which they referred. But Lady Ann contrived to keep the girl near her so that she should not feel neglected nor out of it. She

did not care for the gay and worldly life her sisters led; she had always been the "ugly duckling," who was sent for when any one was ill, or when there was something dull or disagreeable to be done. There is generally one member of every family who is called upon to fill this discouraging but useful rôle. And it was generally agreed that Ann fitted it perfectly. She was a rock, steady, reliable, and a miracle of unselfishness.

Although she was unaware of it, Lord Westingham was favorably impressed with Averil.

"That's a very nice, simple girl," he told Ann one day; "no nonsense about her. If she weren't a Catholic, I'd like Otho to marry her."

"But I heard she was engaged to a Mr. Mellor, who lives at Aspoli," said Ann. "She never mentions it, though."

"Perhaps she's thought better of it. She's a quiet little mouse, but I don't think she's stupid and I can understand Nadine's having taken a fancy to her, poor thing. She must have been very lonely."

He looked suddenly grave. That account of Nadine's last illness offered by Nurse Davis had given rise to a certain sense of compunction in his mind toward her. He wished he had not followed his father so rigidly in his determination to ostracize her. But the thing had gone on so long, and there had never seemed any special reason why he should end the feud. Once or twice it had occurred to him that perhaps when Betty and Stella were married, he would make an effort to end it. Ann would be the only one at home then, and Ann was always kind and charming to lame dogs, and poor relations, and people under a cloud. You could trust Ann to help you in the not too easy task of burying ancient hatchets.

"Anyhow, the girl had nothing to do with it," he went on musingly. "I don't suppose she had any idea of what was in Nadine's will. I'm sure it was as much a surprise to her as it was to us."

On the following Sunday it was arranged that Lady Ann should motor over to a little Catholic church three or four miles away in a village near the sea. It was situated on the estate of an old and rather impoverished Catholic family who owned most of the land thereabouts, and Lady Ann always went there on Sundays when she was at home.

The day was cold but fine; there had been a slight fall of snow in the night and it still lay glistening in the fields as they passed along. There was a strong wind blowing from the sea, but Averil was well wrapped up in her new black coat with the deep fur collar and cuffs. She wore a little close-fitting black satin hat tied on with a filmy black scarf, and in this garb her brilliant fairness showed to great advantage.

Just as they were starting Lord Mendlesham came to his sister and whispered:

"Can't I come with you, Ann?"

She was a little astonished, and said:

"Oh, Otho, I don't think you'd better. Father wouldn't like it."

"He needn't know," said Otho, "and I'd like to come."

She shook her head, smiling.

"No. I won't take the responsibility — he might be very angry."

All his children were a little afraid of Lord Westingham; he could be very alarming when he chose. And although he adored Otho, he was more strict and severe with him than with any of the others.

"It's on her account I want to come," said Otho,

reddening, and indicating the small figure already seated in the motor. "Nancy — I believe I'm falling in love with her."

"All the more reason then for your staying at home. It wouldn't do at all!"

She laughed and went out to join Averil, but the conversation had surprised and alarmed her. In spite of Averil's large fortune, she knew that Lord Westingham would not at all approve of his son's marrying her; even if the girl were free to marry him, which was more than doubtful.

Otho, looking very sulky and disappointed, went off to the smoking-room. That was the worst of Ann — she was so terribly conscientious.

It was not a very large congregation that had assembled in the little church built of gray stone just beyond the village of Sandhythe, yet most of the inhabitants were present. Averil sat with Lady Ann in one of the front pews. She had been present since she came to England at High Mass or Benediction at most of the great London churches — Westminster Cathedral, the Brompton Oratory, the Carmelite church at Kensington, and the Jesuit church at Farm Street. She had heard splendid singing and seen the reverent crowds of worshipers both on Sundays and week-days. But this was the first time she had been present at Mass in a little country church, and the poverty and simplicity of it touched her very much.

As she knelt there she could hear the sonorous breaking of the great waves on the shore. She had caught glimpses of them on the way — had seen the splendid blue and green breakers, crowned with crests of snowy foam, rushing riotously toward the cliffs and then drawing back with a fierce sucking sound as if to gather force for the next advance. Overhead sea-gulls had been flying wildly as if bat-

ting with the wind, and large, white, hurrying clouds had patterned the blue of the sky. The brackish air, smelling strongly of seaweed, had revived and invigorated Averil, and had brought a soft color to her face.

She knelt down by Lady Ann's side and the service proceeded. There was a little singing during the Mass, and after the Gospel a short sermon was preached. It lasted altogether not quite an hour, and then the congregation dispersed. They were just leaving the church when Averil noticed a man rise from a dark corner quite at the back. She could not see his face, but there was something about his movements that struck her as familiar. He followed them out, and she suddenly came face to face with Peter Clutton.

Little more than four months had elapsed since their last meeting at Aspoli, but they had been so full of events and changes that to Averil the time had seemed far longer. She could really hardly believe that this was Peter standing and looking down upon her with the old whimsical laughter in his dark eyes.

"Why, Miss Waring, what a surprise to see you in England!"

Although he called her "Miss Waring," he was not at all sure that she still had the right to that name. He had heard of Princess Nadine's death, and he had even written a little conventional note of sympathy and condolence to Averil, to which he had received no reply, for in her hasty flight from Rome she had forgotten to give any instructions about the forwarding of letters. He knew nothing of her whereabouts, and he had not heard from Justin for a long time, not, indeed, since the letter in which he had announced his engagement to Averil. Many times he had pictured her back at Aspoli, making

preparations, perhaps, for her wedding. Often he had wondered whether it would be delayed by the death of the princess or whether it would, on the contrary, be hurried forward because the girl was now quite alone. In any case, he had kept sternly before him day and night the certainty that the marriage would take place. Only there had never been any announcement of it in the English papers. Surely Justin would have published the fact; he had many friends in England.

"It's such a long story," said Lady Ann, "that you had much better come back with us to luncheon, and then Averil can tell you all about it."

He looked at Averil. Her face was white, cold, expressionless. Her manner to him had been frigid; she had shown no pleasure at seeing him again. He could not but be conscious of the change in her. Still he felt strangely curious as to the reason of her presence at Westingham.

"I'm afraid I couldn't leave Monica to-day," he said hesitatingly, looking at Averil.

"It's your only chance. Miss Waring insists upon leaving us early on Tuesday morning."

Miss Waring? Then she was not yet Mrs. Mellor, and he felt a violent sense of relief as he followed Lady Ann down the path to the road.

Averil went on ahead. She could not hear what they were saying. She was telling herself savagely that Peter had never cared for her at all. He had been only amusing himself, unconscious of her hurt.

"You know my aunt left her all her money. She's quite an heiress now," said Lady Ann. "And she doesn't seem to realize it a bit. It's criminal to let a young girl like that go about alone — she'll be the prey of every fortune hunter she meets. And then she's so pretty — even Otho's on the brink of falling in love with her."

Peter listened with an unmoved face.

"But she's to marry Justin Mellor," he said; "that'll keep her safe from fortune hunters." There was a touch of bitterness in his voice which did not escape her.

"She never talks about him, and she doesn't wear a ring. I can't help thinking it must be at an end. But won't you come? You knew her before — she might tell you."

Peter laughed. "I am the last person people ever confide in," he said easily.

But his eyes were fixed on that slight black figure moving on ahead of them down the steep path. She seemed to be swaying a little in the strong sea-wind.

He helped them into the motor, and then, lifting his hat, said good-by with a grave smile. He walked quickly away, not once turning his head in the direction of the departing car. Averil — enormously rich — he had a vague idea of Princess Nadine's fortune, and that all of it should have come to her, as well as the palatial Villa Magnolia, made him feel as if the world were reeling about his ears. It put her definitely out of his reach forever, whether she ended by marrying Justin or not. And she was staying with the Westinghams, and young Otho was falling in love with her. And why had she looked at him in that grave, cold, almost unfriendly manner? Did she not like being reminded of her old, dependent days at Aspoli?

But it hurt him to have hard thoughts of her, and he put them sharply from his mind. And how beautiful she was! In that at least she had not changed. She was less of the simple girl, much more of the self-possessed woman of the world, and she had looked disturbingly lovely in that black coat with the dark fur coming close to her white throat. He walked on for more than a mile along the coast, buf-

feted by the boisterous wind. He liked the little struggle it involved, the sense of beating his way against it; he felt that he could not go home to Monica just yet.

In the car Lady Ann said to Averil:

"I'm sorry he couldn't come back with us. I suppose you saw a good deal of him at Aspoli when he stayed there last summer with Mr. Mellor? He told me about you. I have always meant to tell you. It was the first we heard about your living with my aunt."

"Yes — he used to come to the Villa Magnolia with Mr. Mellor," said Averil.

She felt in her heart that if Peter had wished to see her again and hear more of all that had taken place since their last meeting, he would not have refused Lady Ann's invitation with such unflattering promptitude; he would certainly have managed to leave his sister just this once. She saw now how false it had all been — that dear, beautiful dream. Nadine had been right, yet she had persistently refused to believe her. And did he know that, after all, the claims of poetic justice were to remain unsatisfied?

But, in spite of her anger, the very sight of him had awakened into strong and violent life the old unrest, the old trembling excitement, the embittering love that she had tried in vain to thrust out of her heart and which his mere presence could evoke. She knew now beyond all doubt that he still kept possession of her heart, and that she loved him as, perhaps, a woman only loves once. And he — he did not love her at all, or surely he would have come back with them to Westingham to-day.

"Do you like his books?" asked Lady Ann presently.

"Very much. But I've only read the two last."

"People think 'Until the Harvest' is the finest thing he's done. But personally I prefer 'Richard Scarsdale.' I believe he's making quite a lot of money. They only moved down here a few weeks ago. He's taken a pretty little house not far from the village and it suits poor Miss Clutton. I have been over to see her sometimes."

They were traveling quickly, and the wind was whistling so shrilly in their ears that conversation was not very easy, and they had to raise their voices in order to be heard.

"He's the most devoted and unselfish brother," Lady Ann continued presently. "He came down here entirely on Monica's account. I believe it was a great wrench to him to leave London and all his interests in the East End. But he never says anything about that — he thinks only of her."

And Averil was thinking how absurd it had been of her ever to suppose she had won the least place in his life, in his thoughts.

"If there had been more time I would have taken you over there. Don't you think you could stay a little longer, so that we might arrange it?"

"Oh, no — it would be impossible — I mean, thank you very much; it is very kind of you to think of it — but I couldn't stay longer," stammered Averil, aghast at the suggestion.

She was cold and shivering when she reached Westingham in spite of her heavy furs. It was almost luncheon-time, and she quite dreaded having to sit through that long and elaborate meal; she wished she could have had it alone in her room. When she went upstairs to take off her hat Nurse Davis was in the room waiting for her. She saw at once by Averil's face that something had occurred to upset her, and wondered what it could be. Averil

had started off in good spirits this morning, and now she looked like a little, white, drooping lily. However, it was useless to try to find out anything, for she knew that Averil was determinedly reticent on many subjects.

For instance, she had never again alluded to Justin Mellor. It was as if she had deliberately banished him from her mind.

Later in the day Nurse Davis saw Lady Ann and asked if anything had happened to upset Averil that morning.

"I didn't even know she was upset," said Lady Ann, rather puzzled at the question. "She looked all right at luncheon. I thought she enjoyed the drive this morning, and in church we met a friend — an acquaintance of hers — Mr. Peter Clutton."

"The author?" inquired Nurse Davis, lifting her broad black eyebrows in surprise. "I didn't know she knew him."

"Oh, yes; they met last summer at Aspoli," said Lady Ann. "He was staying with Mr. Mellor there."

Nurse Davis remembered that Averil had once told her she had only one friend in England and that it was quite unlikely they would ever meet; she had not even said whether it was a man or a woman. Now, from the sudden change that had come over her, Nurse Davis felt certain that Mr. Clutton was that friend, and that he was in some way mixed up with that complication of circumstances which had induced her first to become engaged to Justin Mellor, and then summarily to break off that engagement.

Nurse Davis had always felt certain that there must be another man in the case, but she had never heard Averil mention one.

She said carelessly to her that evening, when she

was dressed for dinner and the maid had left the room:

"Lady Ann tells me you met a friend in church to-day."

Averil, taken aback by the suddenness and unexpectedness of the speech, turned crimson and looked extremely confused.

"Yes," she said, and turned abruptly away so that her face was in shadow. But she knew that nothing ever escaped Nurse Davis, and that she must have seen that hateful, degrading blush.

"But is it any reason why you should look all day as if you were in the depths of misery?" inquired Nurse Davis, smiling in a superior, sophisticated way.

Averil did not answer.

"Do you know him very well?"

Averil drew herself up proudly.

"No. And I am never likely to see him again!"

"Does he know that your engagement's broken off?"

"I don't suppose he does," said Averil, in a proud, cold tone; "but, in any case, it's no concern of his."

"To look at you one would think it might be," said Nurse Davis coolly.

"How dare you speak to me like that?" said Averil angrily.

Nurse Davis waited a moment and then said very quietly:

"If you would only believe me, Averil, it would do you all the good in the world to talk about it. Sometimes it makes mountains out of molehills to discuss things, but there are times when it turns great, big, black mountains into small, little, insignificant molehills, and I'm not sure that this isn't one of them."

"There is nothing to say," affirmed Averil proudly.

She had seen for herself the terms of friendship that existed between Peter and Lady Ann — a friendship founded upon community of interests and of ideals and a deep mutual regard. And, having seen it with eyes bravely determined to envisage a distasteful truth, Averil felt only an immense and overwhelming desire to leave Westingham. Peter lived but a few miles away; there would be always a danger of meeting him. And other people besides Nurse Davis might penetrate to the very boundaries at least of her secret. The thought hurt her pride, and filled her with a sense of shame that made her suffer anew. It was because of the frail little hope that "Until the Harvest" had awakened within her that she had finally determined to break off her engagement to Justin.

"What I wanted to tell you then — what I want to tell you now — are one and the same thing — I love you."

To-day he had looked at her, spoken to her, almost as if she had been a stranger. Perhaps he was angry with her on account of her behavior to Justin.

It was a relief to leave Westingham, although she was sorry to part from Lady Ann.

"But you must come down to Whitechapel and see me," said Lady Ann. "I'd like you to spend a few days there if it wouldn't bore you."

"Oh, it wouldn't bore me at all — I should love to see it," said Averil.

At least, in Whitechapel there would be no chance of meeting Peter. He was safely occupied at Sandhythe with his sister and his books. He had altogether relinquished those other works to which he had been so much attached.

"I shall be settled there directly after my sisters'

wedding," said Lady Ann. "And I think my father will go abroad—he generally does—so I shall be quite free to spend a long time down there. I shall look forward to your coming. Don't forget."

She kissed Averil affectionately at parting.

CHAPTER XXIX

JUSTIN MELLOR did not at once return to Aspoli after he had received Averil's letter. Although he had long ago realized that things were not as they should be between them he had not anticipated this drastic action on her part. He had expected that she would make her mourning an excuse for delaying the wedding, and he had felt that it would be unwise of him to oppose this decision if it were made. But that she should have fled in this way, breaking off all communication with him and giving him no clue as to her whereabouts, left him in but little doubt as to the finality of her action.

There had been a first wild and scarcely controlled impulse to follow her, to seek her out and entreat her to reconsider her decision. He felt that it would not be difficult to trace her if he went to London and interviewed her lawyer and guardian, Mr. Robinson, who must certainly be aware of her whereabouts. When she saw the havoc and shipwreck she had made of his life she would surely relent. But it was not only his pride that condemned the project; there were other forces within him which had been rudely awakened and now asserted their mastery over him.

She had never loved him. He had been aware of this from the very first. She had acquiesced in the engagement probably because Princess Nadine

had explained its suitability and advantages to her. She had been educated in a country where marriages were arranged in this way, and where girls were accustomed to submit in these matters to the wishes of their parents and guardians. But when he envisaged the days they had spent together, the meager, unsatisfactory hours which she had reluctantly allotted to him, he saw quite clearly that if he had awakened any feeling within her it was one of dislike, if not of actual repulsion. It had only stimulated his ardor, increased his determination to win her. Almost always, except on that last day, he had shown patience and moderation. Twice only had he kissed her, and each time she had shrunk from him with a look of fear in her eyes. On the very first day of their acquaintance she had told him that they spoke a different language. And he had never made any progress in winning her. That was quite clear to him now as he looked back upon the days of their engagement. Her final flight had been the expression of her intense desire to escape from him. She had never loved him, and she had come near to hating him.

He spent that winter solitarily in Rome, making many acquaintances and but few friends among the brilliant cosmopolitan crowd that filled that city during the winter in the days before the War. It was an unhappy time for Justin, and he gave himself as little leisure for thought as possible. He dined and lunched out; went to brilliant parties in ancient palaces; he hunted and played bridge and motored, and was as popular as a rich and agreeable young man can be. But the thought of Averil haunted him, and when he went back to Ascoli in the early spring the sight of its familiar ways was almost more than he could bear.

His heart ached for her presence. The loneliness

he now experienced was no longer a tranquil solitude wherein he could plan and dream. It was as if the figure of Averil haunted all the rooms of the old villa. It was a ghost-haunted place. He could not go into the garden without fancying that he could see her slight white figure in the gloom of the orange orchard or the ilex-wood. She was always there, eluding him and as it were mocking him. He loved her more than he had ever loved her. It was a strange thing that he bore her no ill will for that final cutting of the knot. He had not yet learned to be angry with her; he had been spared at least that "madness in the brain." Although his heart was savagely hurt he saw that from her point of view the action had been wise and justifiable. One could not compel love, and she had never deceived him about her own lack of it for him. In the beginning he had seen the idea of their marriage from a purely objective standpoint; it had been suggested to him by various persons even before he had had any serious thoughts about it. But the adventure had quickly engulfed him. Jealousy of Peter had set a match to the flame. And held by the grip of that passion he had flung honor to the four winds. His own ruthless counter-stroke had served the double purpose of ridding himself of Peter, who promised to be a dangerous rival, and placing himself in solitary possession of the field. He had acted swiftly and unscrupulously in order to clear the path which he hoped would lead him to Averil. And up to a certain point everything had been propitious and in his favor. He still clung pitifully to the belief that if Princess Nadine had lived the marriage would certainly have taken place. The prospect of the two friends continuing to live so near to each other would have largely influenced Averil. And no doubt it would have turned out as well as most mar-

riages. He still believed that he could have taught Averil to love him. . . .

At first after his return to the Villa Annunziata he lived in the hope that Averil would come back to the Villa Magnolia.

It had been let to some Americans since November, but they had given it up and returned to New York several months before their time there had expired, and it was already tenantless when Justin returned to Aspoli.

Although he never wrote to Peter now he sometimes received a letter from Monica Clutton, who had always strangely enough liked her brother's friend. And in one of these letters she, perhaps realizing how his heart must ache for news of the woman he loved, although she was ignorant as to the real nature of their parting, had told him that she had heard "Miss Waring was very happy working with Lady Ann Cheverton at her settlement in Whitechapel." It was the first news that had reached him of Averil, but he could not tell that to Monica in his reply.

After all, wasn't it natural that she should go to Princess Nadine's relations since she had none of her own? Again he conquered that mad desire to go to London and seek her out, and plead his cause as never in the past he had pleaded it, and entreat her to listen.

There were no beautiful and comforting memories for him. He had wronged his friend; he had been abandoned by the woman he had falsely won. He sometimes saw these two facts in juxtaposition and one seemed but the natural retributive consequence of the other. He felt as if some invisible but powerful force had deliberately meted out to him a punishment that was subtle, carefully chosen and capable of inflicting upon him the maximum of

pain and shame. Like Macbeth, he had "wrongly won," and he was to pay heavily for that single impulse of dishonor to which he had yielded.

Then he excused himself before that bitter tribunal of conscience which had after all been so slow and tardy to summon him to appear before it. Love had driven him to that expedient. He had loved Averil, and he had seen a man attempting to come between him and the object of his love. He had only struck out to defend his own. He had been afraid of Peter; there were things about Peter, his personal beauty, his charm, and something steadfast and true that lay beyond all these surface attractions, which might very readily appeal to a young and unsophisticated girl brought up as Averil Waring had been. But however desperate the situation a man may not trifle with honor and emerge unscathed. Justin knew that he had acted deliberately, with purpose and intention and with consent. He was suffering for it now.

The Villa was too closely bound up with thoughts of her to permit of his forgetting her, and he could not exile her from its precincts. The lack of occupation was an additional trial in the stormy and wet weather of the early spring. There were melancholy days of rain, chill, unhappy days when the great waves beat against the high bastions of the cliffs and flung balls of foam into the air. When it was fine he spent long hours in the active inaction of motoring, and he made many trips to Naples to buy things to embellish his house. But it was all done for himself now, not because he wanted to make it beautiful for Averil, for he could never hope now that she would come back.

It was on one of these expeditions that he saw some of Peter's novels exposed for sale in a shop-window in Naples, and remembering that he had

never read those more recent works which had brought name and fame to Clutton, he bought two or three of them. Among them were "Richard Scarsdale" and "Until the Harvest," which Peter had sent to Averil for a wedding present — the only one he believed that she had received. It was because she had read them and admired them with her girlish enthusiasm that Justin bought them now. He was conscious of a tardy wish to understand something of her point of view as a Catholic. For he had felt always that her religion was the essential thing which had kept them apart and prevented any real intimacy of thought between them. And he knew quite well that this was precisely the point upon which she and Peter had so readily and immediately sympathized with and understood each other.

He read both books during the stormy and wet week that followed, when the wind was howling around the Villa Annunziata and the whole of the coast-line was blotted out by cloud and rain. He took them in the order in which they had been written, finishing "Richard Scarsdale" before he commenced "Until the Harvest." Justin could not but acknowledge that they were very able books, beautifully written and thoughtfully planned. If it had been Peter's intention to prove that the novel with a definitely religious purpose can also be a work of art, he had come very near to succeeding in this aim. There was much that was both fine and tender in "Until the Harvest," with its simple and detailed account of a boy's life at a Catholic school. But there was more — there was the definite expression of that fierce faith which flamed like a burning torch in Clutton's life, illuminating all his actions. You could not know the man even slightly without being conscious of it. It was like some powerful force

that permeated his words and actions. It had often irritated Justin and perplexed him too with its violence; it had seemed to him to lack proportion, to usurp too much space in Peter's character and thoughts. He only wanted to understand it now because, although it was too late, he knew that thus he would learn to understand Averil better. He wanted to comfort himself with the thought that their marriage would have been utterly unsuitable and would have given rise in due course to all kinds of difficulties and complications, temporal and spiritual. To put it briefly, he was a worldly man and he had wished to marry a totally unworldly woman; he had no particular religious beliefs, though when in England he generally went to Church on Sundays, and he had wished to marry a woman who was pious and devout in the practice of perhaps the most dogmatic religion that exists. Lastly, he had wanted to lay his wealth at the feet of one who had no regard for it at all. Justin made an effort to see himself as he must have appeared to Averil. It was not a particularly pleasant process, but it had a bracing quality. Would any of these essential differences have mattered so greatly had she cared for him? A great, enduring love makes short work of barriers. . . .

But he was a little astonished to find that Peter's books no longer irritated him. Because Averil had held those same beliefs and ideals something of her glamour had passed into them. They became beautiful to him because they were an essential part of the beauty of her character. The very holiness of them belonged inescapably to her. Once he had jestingly asserted that he might even try to become a Catholic for her sake, but there had never been any reality in the intention. He had only said it in order to try to bring her a little nearer. He was

very ignorant of the Catholic Church, and until he lived in Italy he had come but little in contact with it except through Peter. He had the contemptuous indifference toward it which many people display when they are not actively hostile. There were many things about it which he considered deplorable as an infringement of personal liberty. Confession was one of them. He had never discussed the subject with Averil, but he felt that he would hate to hear she had just been or was going to confession.

Confession and absolution. There was a very remarkable scene in "Until the Harvest" where the hero after two years of apostasy returns to his Faith. To do that certain things had been necessary before he could obtain pardon for that sin of sins. He had to pass the successive stages of repentance, confession, penance, and absolution, a formidable sequence. Throughout the ages the Catholic Church had declared her power to absolve for sins committed. "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." He knew that on these words the Church founded her divinely-given power to absolve. But the co-operation of the individual was necessary. . . . For a moment he considered that Divine Charter which had brought pardon to millions of those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death and guided their feet into the way of peace. It was a question rather of bestowing peace than of taking away liberty. There was, if one considered it in this light, a reciprocity about it that was simply astonishing. One went through the sharp and bitter torment of self-betrayal to find a swift and merciful forgiveness and absolution, almost eagerly given. Did men ever accustom themselves to it? Did it ever become a simple and easy routine? Or were there always the humiliation and shame from which

the proud, sensitive soul shrinks as from an ordeal not to be borne?

That scene of confession in "Until the Harvest" caused Justin to be startled at the trend of his own thoughts. For the first time he had seen clearly what sacramental absolution might mean. Surely to restore one's peace of mind no sacrifice, even of one's heart's blood, could be accounted too great — always supposing that one believed it could actually be obtained by these means. Peter's hero had evidently had a simple faith in the hard and bitter remedy. And perhaps there are few souls so complacent in their pride that they have not at least once felt this need of absolution, this desire to turn a fresh page. Tremendous words with the still more tremendous promise attached: "*If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow.*" What was more closely bound up with the Redemption than this promise of swift forgiveness? If the means to gain it struck an outsider as hard and difficult, the actual and immediate reward was not to be gainsaid.

Ah, but it pre-supposed a condition of faith that for the average free-thinking mind was clearly unobtainable — a belief in the divinely bestowed and divinely guarded infallibility of that Church which held still those supernatural powers. He was very far from that condition of faith himself; he was only thinking idly how eager a Catholic would be, placed as he was with that tormenting remembrance of a momentary yielding to a temptation to dishonor, to seek through that very sacrament of Penance the absolution of his sin. He learned too from Peter's book that because of the generosity of God (the eternal wonder of the Catholic) not only absolution is received but an overflowing grace comes to him who seeks that same sacrament. . . .

All very well for men brought up to regard such things as an inevitable essential part of their spiritual life. Men, for instance, like the erring hero of "Until the Harvest." Here was a boy, educated by priests in Catholic schools and Catholic colleges, with religion surrounding him always as an atmosphere. The gradual process of falling away, the first carelessness leading to the final sin of apostasy were traced very clearly, almost relentlessly by Peter. It was a piece of psychology that exactly suited Clutton's talent — that detailed downward progress of a soul that had ceased to correspond with graces received. And in the end that soul returned to its allegiance and the first practical fruit of its conversion was that deliberate seeking of absolution as an inevitable and necessary prelude to the renewal of grace.

But to this fictitious hero it was no new thing. It was only a return to the practices inculcated in youth. But for a man who had lived all his life outside the Church which decreed these things, what an immense step — what a profound humiliation — would be involved!

Justin read to the end with an attention that was almost breathless. He saw clearly as never before the immensity of the gulf which had separated him from Averil. She should have loved and married a man who shared her Faith and had the same ideals and standards. Not one who stood afar off and was indifferent where he did not actually mock at and denigrate that which to her was holy. She had never discussed these things with him — was that not proof conclusive of their un-intimacy? If she had loved him at all surely she would have spoken of those things which played so large a part in her daily life.

He seemed to have a vision of Averil now freed

from an engagement which must always have seemed to her unholy.

He put down the book, and taking a hat and coat he walked down the long white road that led to Aspoli. Almost from the moment he started he knew that he was going to visit the church there. Not to pray — his mood was very far removed from prayer. His heart was still in fierce rebellion. The justice of punishment does not mitigate its pain nor reduce the raw and wounded sense of degradation it can bring. What would Averil think — what would Peter think — of him if they knew the whole story of that intrigue skilfully and remorselessly planned, to which he had lent all the sharpness of his intellect, the energy of his will? Would they not despise him? Did he not deserve all they could give him of contempt and scorn?

Inside the church it was quiet and gloomy, for outside the dusk had begun to fall. A few kneeling persons were visible, and in one corner some candles burned before a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows, breaking the twilight gloom with their subdued radiance. There was a heavy smell of spent incense. He sat down in a chair near the door and presently he saw a priest come into the church and enter one of the confessionals. A woman rose from her knees and knelt down again on the step of the box, putting her face close to the grating. Justin could hear a faint whispering, but no words reached him. She remained there for some time and he wondered idly what kind of thing she was saying, and why the recital of her sins should take so long. When at last she emerged he saw her quite distinctly. She was quite a young girl, pale, slight, and dressed in black. There was no emotion in her face, no sign of having passed through a difficult or strenuous ordeal. She was grave and thoughtful, as

if she were engaged upon some important business. A man immediately got up and took her place, and this time Justin could presently distinguish the priest's voice speaking. Was he offering counsel? Did he comment upon those sins laid before him? Was it not a fearful thing to listen week after week to the moral failures of other men? Was it not conceivably almost as terrible for the priest as for the penitent? Almost Justin saw himself rising and following the man to that place of self-betrayal.

He rose hastily and fled from the church, wondering what could have possessed him to consider for one moment the possibility of committing such an action. It was the result of suggestion, he told himself, begun by the reading of Peter's book, followed by this chance glimpse of the actual practising of those very things Peter had described. He was almost horror-stricken to think he could so far have been influenced by them as to consider for a moment their practicability where he himself was concerned. It was a relief to find himself outside again, away from that stuffy atmosphere of spent incense, and struggling once more against the fierce cold wind and the stinging rain that slashed his face.

In his life he had done many things that were technically perhaps far more sinful than that betrayal of honor, but there was none which had been capable of leading him into these forlorn byways of remorse. There was not one which had ever seemed to demand of him that he should seek absolution as Catholics sought it. There was not one which could so rise and torment him like a specter from the past.

"All's fair in love," said the proverb. And alas, the proverb lied. Love, of all human passions, makes the strongest claim upon a man's honor.

Love asks and almost always exacts a delicate scrupulousness.

He told himself that he was inclined to be morbid about it to-day. It was the result of the weather combined with solitude and that sense of loss which never left him. He had imprudently permitted his mind to dwell on the closely allied subjects of repentance and absolution, and now they were assuming a certain mastery over him like a germ that has fallen carelessly upon fruitful soil. The soul was beginning to urge its rights; for the moment it had mastered his intellect, his coolness of judgment. He even thought that people with weak minds might be very powerfully affected by Peter's writings, affected perhaps to the point of following the path indicated to its logical conclusion.

Then rebellion came. The book was a tract — like all Peter's novels — a very cleverly contrived, artfully concealed, and insidious tract, masquerading as psychology. He wondered a little at its popularity. Of course it was sincere, terribly, passionately sincere, and that always counted for a great deal. This man who wrote about faith undoubtedly possessed it — there was no question about that. He had as much right to press his point of view on his readers as the exponent of any other cause. The atheist, the agnostic, the socialist, the scientist — have not all these from time to time promulgated their pet *isms* in their novels? Why not then the Catholic? Would there not be perhaps for the Catholic novelist some initial difficulty in separating his story from the influence of Catholicism upon his characters? For it was a religion that penetrated deeply, that ruled and dominated the ordinary events of life, and had exact and precise laws concerning what was right and what was wrong.

"Some day I should like to discuss it all with a clever, broad-minded priest," said Justin to himself.

CHAPTER XXX

"OH, Mr. Mellor, how are you? I never see anything of you now, you are becoming quite a hermit. Mrs. Minchin has been complaining that you have never been near her, and she has been so dull, poor dear, with this bad cold which has kept her indoors for nearly a month. We hoped that we should be quite gay and sociable here this winter with you and the Silcoxes, but they dashed off to America almost before we had set eyes on them. I am sure you must miss the princess sorely ——"

Miss Wilkinson stopped short, for Justin's face reminded her that she was treading on dangerous ground. It had been known in Aspoli that he had fulfilled all their prophecies by becoming engaged to Averil Waring, but no one knew why the engagement had been broken off, nor to whom the blame should be attached. Still it was generally supposed that Averil, finding herself suddenly the possessor of an immense fortune (its size was naturally very much exaggerated by the good gossips of Aspoli), had preferred to retain her liberty for the present.

"And you know she never could endure the color of his hair," Miss Wilkinson had once explained to Mrs. Minchin, who retorted:

"Nonsense, Maud! The truth is that the girl had her head turned by being taken up by the princess, and I daresay when she got all that money she thought she could do much better for herself."

But then, as Miss Wilkinson plaintively alleged, Mrs. Minchin was always so hard on poor Averil.

"Yes, as I was saying," she continued after a

brief pause, "dear Mrs. Minchin is getting quite hipped, and it would be a real charity to go and see her. No, Lupo — you are not to jump up at Mr. Mellor like that; you will lose his good opinion if you do! Remember what happened only the day before yesterday — it is impossible that you can have forgotten so soon!" She waved her whip warningly at Lupo, who crouched at her feet in an attitude of trembling docility. "There, isn't he just like a Christian the way he understands me? Isn't it quite wonderful?"

"Very wonderful!" said Justin dryly, with a glance at the whip.

"Oh, I hope you don't think I'm too severe with him. I love Lupo so much that it would be far pleasanter to spoil him. But then I shouldn't be doing my duty, should I?" She looked up at him artlessly, but as usual did not wait for an answer. "Yes, I have just been to the hotel to sit with Mrs. Minchin, as she can't go out on these wet days. I only wish she were not so impatient with Lupo, for I really can't leave him at home! He did make marks to-day on her new white cloth dress with his dirty paws, but even that didn't justify her in saying in the darling's hearing that she liked dogs only in their proper place. Lupo is so sensitive, and I could see that it hurt his feelings terribly. He can't bear to think people should want him to be shut up in a cold kennel, which is her idea of the proper place for a dear little dog. I did not even scold him for jumping up, because I saw he was sufficiently punished by her unkind words."

Justin saw no way of escape, so he walked on by Miss Wilkinson's side. Some days had elapsed since he had gone down to Aspoli guided by that strange impulse which had followed upon his reading of Peter's book, and he had succeeded in ban-

ishing that train of thought from his mind. But Miss Wilkinson's next words roughly recalled it to him.

"You must not think I am not devoted to Mrs. Minchin, for indeed I am — it is only about the dogs and especially Lupo that she is sometimes the least little bit tactless. She can be kindness itself, and I believe she is simply showering kindness upon an English priest who is staying at the hotel just now. She says he is a Jesuit, but some one else told me he was a Dominican. It doesn't matter really which he is, does it? I only hope she will not begin discussing religion with him. That is what I am so afraid of, for she is always on the lookout for some new craze. When I first knew her she was Christian Scientist, but she gave that up after she had to undergo a severe operation which caused her a great deal of suffering. She said it was really only useful as long as one was quite well. And Catholics are so dangerous, aren't they, Mr. Mellor?"

She looked hard at him as she spoke, perhaps to ascertain from his face whether she were again treading upon dangerous ground.

"I confess I have not found them so," he replied with a smile.

"Ah, but then you are so sensible and clever — I am sure you have a well-balanced mind — I said so to Mrs. Minchin when I first saw you, and I am really rather a good reader of character. You would be instinctively upon your guard against their intriguing ways. I have lived a long time in Italy, Mr. Mellor, and I can honestly say that I have never spoken to a priest, although Lupo did run after Padre Lorenzo one day, which made it very difficult for me to avoid speaking to him, especially as he patted the dear darling's head in quite a nice, understanding way. I have never been to a single

service in one of their churches. Of course, we do have our own all the winter, for the manager of the hotel lends a room to the chaplain for the purpose. I only wish dogs were allowed to attend it, but he was so dreadfully scandalized when I suggested it. I do so hate being parted from Lupo even for an hour, and he does cry and shriek so when I go without him, it is quite heartrending. Oh, here is your gate, Mr. Mellor! I suppose you do not care for a longer stroll, for I am going up to the top of the hill and I should be so glad of your company?"

"Thanks very much, but I'm afraid I can't this evening," said Justin. "What did you say the priest's name was, Miss Wilkinson?"

"Oh, his name is Father Parker, and Mrs. Minchin says he is really a very clever, well-informed person. Do you mean to call upon him, Mr. Mellor? I am sure he would be delighted to see you, for I believe he has only lately landed from India and he knows hardly any Italian, so that an English face is more than welcome. Now, Lupo, say good-by to Mr. Mellor nicely and give him a paw!"

She picked Lupo up, muddy as he was, and held out an extremely dirty paw toward Justin, who took it to humor her. The whole scene would have seemed grotesque to him had it not been at the same time a little pathetic.

He turned in at his own gate and walked slowly back to the house, but he felt restless and undecided. It was strange that only a few days ago he had uttered the wish to meet a broad-minded priest with whom he could discuss certain questions that troubled him, and now he had just learned that there was an English priest staying in Aspoli. The coincidence made him feel for the moment a trifle superstitious, just as if he had unexpectedly received the answer to prayer. He had to battle with him-

self to conquer the impulse to repair to the hotel that very evening, on the pretext of calling upon Mrs. Minchin and asking after her cold. That wish of his, he told himself, had been an idle, fugitive affair. Still, a fellow-countryman who was ill seemed to demand some courtesy from him, whatever his profession. Even if he went to see him he need not discuss religion with him, and he would be almost certain to meet with a like reticence unless he started the subject himself. Still it was an odd thing that he should have drifted to Aspoli just now . . . at this crisis.

He strolled down to the hotel on the following afternoon, uncertain till the last moment whether he should ask for Mrs. Minchin or for Father Parker. The decision was ultimately taken out of his hands, for he met Mrs. Minchin, closely muffled almost to the eyes, standing upon the doorstep. She was taking advantage of an interval of warm sunshine to set forth upon a little walk — the first, she informed him, that she had taken for quite a month.

"I am only praying that I shan't meet Maud Wilkinson and that ridiculous dog of hers," she told Justin with some acerbity. "I really don't feel well enough to put up with either of them to-day. One's nerves get rather on edge after being shut up for so long in one's room. Were you coming to see any one here, Mr. Mellor?"

"Yes, I was coming to call upon you and then upon Father Parker. I wonder if I shall find him in?" said Justin.

"Oh, he is in, of course, but it is very unlikely that you will see him. He is not at all well to-day, and he has not left his room. But you can ask and see. I have quite made friends with him myself, but of course I don't let him talk about religion to me. I know that is what Maud Wilkinson is afraid

of — she gave me quite a lecture on the subject yesterday.”

“Oh, I think I could even risk that!” said Justin easily. “But I feel I ought to go and see if he’s got all he wants.”

“The hotel people are most kind and attentive,” said Mrs. Minchin. She looked at him narrowly. She had heard a good deal about his engagement to Averil from people in Rome, and from the somewhat garbled account that had reached her she believed that it had been broken off on religious grounds. That did not of course make Averil any the less to blame, for she had known all the time that Justin was not a Catholic.

They remained talking for a few minutes and then she said:

“I think I had better go for my walk or I shall miss this nice gleam of sun. If you are still there when I come back I hope you will come to my room and I will give you a cup of tea.”

“Thank you very much,” said Justin. He raised his hat and went on into the hotel. He sent up his card asking if Father Parker could receive him, and by this time he had quite persuaded himself that he was only visiting him as a matter of common courtesy and to find out if he had all that he required.

But the answer was rather long in coming, and one or two people passing through the vestibule eyed the young Englishman who was sitting there so obviously restless and ill at ease. Justin fidgeted and grew impatient and once he very nearly lost all courage and went away. But that would be a foolish, cowardly thing to do, and would signify that he was afraid to meet this priest lest he should be tempted to ask him certain questions.

The answer when it did come was satisfactory, and Justin was shown upstairs into a large room

overlooking the sea. There was a small terrace just beyond the window and the invalid was lying out upon it in a long chair. As Justin approached he was aware of a man perhaps about forty years old, but thin and gaunt from illness.

His face was of a curious ashen hue, and his immense eyes looked all the larger because they were set in hollows, bister-colored. He looked what he was — a dying man.

"It's most kind of you to come and pay me a visit, Mr. Mellor. I know you very well by name, and your villa very well by sight. Won't you bring a chair out for yourself?"

Justin fetched one and brought it out to the terrace. He sat down feeling a little awkward, as some people do when suddenly confronted with a very ill person.

"I came to see if I could do anything for you. I heard you were ill," he said, "and I'm almost the only Englishman in the place — the only resident one at any rate."

"It is very kind of you," repeated the priest, "but I'm well looked after here. I was on my way home from India, but they shipped me off at Naples as I got suddenly worse. The doctor advised me to come here, but I think it was a mistake. I've been too ill to leave, but I hope some day to get to a hospital — perhaps to the Blue Nuns in Rome."

"If my motor is of any use to you you must tell me. It's quite at your disposal," said Justin.

"Thank you — later on, perhaps, when I can face the journey. Did Padre Lorenzo tell you that I was here, Mr. Mellor?"

"No — I hardly know Padre Lorenzo, and I haven't seen him since I came back this time. I — I am not a Catholic," said Justin.

"This is a nice change in the weather," said Fa-

ther Parker, turning his head for a moment seaward, "it's quite warm out here to-day."

"I wish you could come up to my place — the view from the terrace is almost the best in Aspoli," said Justin. "I could bring the car for you."

The priest shook his head.

"I'm afraid I shall be a prisoner here until I'm well enough to be moved to a hospital. And if I can only get a little better I shall perhaps be allowed to go back to my own monastery and — die."

He spoke very calmly.

"To die!" repeated Justin, as if the statement had startled him.

"Yes — I haven't many weeks to live, they tell me, and from what the doctors say this last bit of the road isn't going to be easy. In fact, they have told me that it'll get worse and worse, as far as pain goes, till the end. I'm praying to be able to bear it without any drugs."

He smiled, a curious, remote smile. Then he added quietly:

"Pain is very valuable to us. One oughtn't to want it to be taken away or diminished. But doctors can't be expected to see that in the same light. It's their business to soften — to alleviate —"

"They are more merciful, I suppose," said Justin.

"Or less so, shall we say?" said Father Parker, still smiling, although now Justin perceived that little drops of perspiration were gathering thickly on his brow just under the rim of black hair that was going gray.

"Why should you think pain so — valuable?" asked Justin, almost rebelliously. He thought the view an unpleasant and exaggerated one.

"Valuable as penance for sin; valuable because through it our life conforms more closely to that of our Divine Lord. And as a sign of God's mercy,

permitting us to suffer in this world that our time in purgatory may be shortened."

Justin stirred restlessly.

"What a cruel doctrine!" he said.

The priest smiled.

"Do you know what St. Francis of Sales's final teaching was upon his death-bed? '*Ask nothing — refuse nothing.*' So you see one does not like to refuse, although the cup may be bitter. Did you ever read the '*Hound of Heaven*'?"

"Oh, yes — I have read it. I admire it greatly as a poem, and also from a literary point of view. One seems to hear the sound of hurrying and pursuing feet all through it."

"Yes," said Father Parker. "Have you ever heard them?"

Justin started. A week ago he would have answered the question with a proud and arrogant negative. But he thought of that single afternoon when he had gone down to the church in Aspoli to conquer the fierce unrest that had taken hold of him, body and soul, and it seemed to him then that he had been endeavoring to elude pursuing feet. He answered with some confusion:

"I don't know. It's impossible for me to talk about experiences of that kind — you wouldn't understand my ignorance."

He turned his face seaward, and Father Parker, glancing at him with a look of kindly and rather wistful interest, suddenly became aware that this young man, with the cold proud face and forbidding manner, had not come to-day for the sole purpose of making a polite visit upon a suffering fellow-countryman.

Father Parker had worked for many years in the mission field, living a detached and very ascetic life, but his love for souls was intense, and, ill and dying

as he was, he longed to stretch out a succoring hand to just one more soul before he died. He wondered why Justin had sought him out.

Justin went away that day without making any allusion to the recent reflections which had both obsessed and perplexed his mind. But he thought he would certainly go to see Father Parker again. He liked him, and there was the stuff of a brave soldier in him. And he was dying. It ought to be easy perhaps to speak — if one wanted to speak of very private affairs — to a dying man. . . .

"You'll come again, won't you?" said Father Parker, when he rose to go, "your visit has been a great pleasure to me."

Justin promised to return. He went to Naples on the following morning and purchased some little delicacies which he thought might tempt the appetite of an invalid, and in the afternoon he took them down to the hotel with him. This time he did not encounter Mrs. Minchin and he was rather glad of the fact. He was in the state of wishing to make his inquiries unobserved and by night in accordance with historical example.

"I want to ask you a question — to put a question to you," he said suddenly to Father Parker when they were sitting out on the little terrace as usual.

"By all means," said the priest. He had been expecting a remark of the kind. "But you must remember, please, I'm not infallible. But if you want the Church's teaching on a particular point I suppose I can give it to you."

"It is the case of a friend of mine," said Justin in a guarded tone. "He is like myself, a Protestant."

In his soft voice now lowered to a dull, unemotional monotone he quietly proceeded to relate the story of his own perfidy with circumstantial detail.

And to do him justice he did not spare himself.

Seen thus it was an ugly story. Not a pleasant remembrance of himself for a proud man to keep in his heart. But Justin had never in his life come so near to being a hero as he did in that hour when he brought himself to relate the episode as though it had happened to another man.

This was the next best thing to confession, surely. It was confession without the humiliating degrading task of acknowledging and denouncing the dishonor as his own. Yet it brought with it no small sense of relief.

"I can not advise your friend, as he is not of our Faith," said Father Parker, when he had listened attentively to the end. "But I can tell you what a priest would advise a Catholic who was his penitent to do if he had made such a confession to him in the sacrament of Penance."

"I think that is just what my friend would wish to know," said Justin. "I think if I were able to tell him that he would be perfectly satisfied. He is unhappy."

"I am sure he must be. He has wronged his friend, and wronged also the woman he loved. He was tempted through jealousy to deliberate deceit and he fell. Even if he did not actually lie he produced a false impression and made statements which were ambiguous and purposely misleading."

"Well, imagine, please, that the man — a Catholic — had come to you with this confession."

Justin's face was very pale; his lips were so dry he could hardly articulate. He had the feeling that he was baring his breast for a blow. The blow came.

"He would have to make reparation. He would have to undo the wrong as far as was possible. He would receive absolution on this understanding."

Justin's face was turned a little from the light. He sat very still, controlling his features. But he had a strange sinking of the heart, such as he felt a man might have who had just heard a heavy sentence passed upon him.

"You mean that is the only way he could gain forgiveness and absolution?" he said at last.

"I don't see how a priest could give any other counsel. When a wrong has been done, to the injury of another, it is necessary to repair it. The thief must restore the goods he has taken — it is not enough to confess the theft. The man who has borne false witness against his neighbor, thereby defaming his character and injuring him, must acknowledge his perjury."

"Don't you think that such advice carried out would lead to a man's being humiliated — even degraded, in the eyes of his fellow-men?" said Justin, slowly.

"The degradation to the man's soul comes from his own actions, not from the acknowledgment of them. And if he felt a sensible humiliation it would be an excellent thing for his soul. On the human plane aren't punishments that involve personal humiliation those that tell most — that are longest remembered and most feared?"

"There would be no other way?" persisted Justin.

"I can not conceive of any other way. The Catholic in confession has one great object in view — to put himself right with God. He is penitent, and he desires to win back if he can the state of grace he has lost through his own malice. Well, the Church asks of him contrition, purpose of amendment, confession, and penance. Those are hard words to Protestant ears, Mr. Mellor. And they represent steep paths."

"To Protestant ears," said Justin, "they represent insuperable obstacles."

"With a Catholic it is different," said Father Parker; "a Catholic who has fallen from grace is unhappy in the knowledge, unless, of course, he is obdurate in his sin. His prayers and almsgivings are rendered meritless; he can not approach the other sacraments until he has made confession of his sin. We are speaking of the man who repents — the man who would say: '*Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son.*' He chooses the only way by which he can return to the path he has abandoned. It is hard and narrow, but it is the only one. And we can not imagine nor limit the abundance of grace that may flow into the heart of a man who has thus prostrated himself and made a fervent act of contrition followed by a good humble confession."

Justin rose from his seat.

"Ah, if your friend were a Catholic he would know without asking what would be required of him!" said the priest. But he looked wistfully at Justin as he spoke.

"Your decision has interested me very much," said Justin, "but I'm afraid it will not be of any practical use to my friend. He could not, I am sure from my knowledge of him, take the only course that is open to him of all those you recommend — that of going to his friend and making confession to him!"

He said good-by and went slowly down the stairs, deep in reflection. He had gained what he had asked for — a disinterested, impartial, and unbiassed judgment upon his own case, and his own metaphorical self-scourging had never held one-tenth of the concentrated savage bitterness of these practised

blows. It was the meanness of his past action that hurt so! But to go to Peter with that tale on his lips? He honestly believed that he would rather die than accept so hideous an alternative.

As he walked home quickly through the gathering dusk he thought of the people whom he had watched going to confession in the church at Aspoli. How could those grown men and women submit to that process — in his eyes so degrading? Yet Father Parker had said it was the only means for a Catholic to win back the state of grace he had lost. Perhaps, therefore, they availed themselves of it joyfully as the definite turning of a new page. He could conceive that in certain rare instances it might be a relief. But to make a common practice of it — to approach it regularly in the way Peter did, for example — surely that was unnecessary, even unwholesome. What right had the Church to impose so cruel an obligation?

Yet Justin was perfectly aware that had he been a Catholic brought up to these practices, accustomed to their discipline, he would have carried out that counsel to the last letter in order to regain his peace of mind. He did not call it, as Father Parker had done, the "wish to put himself right with God." It was much more the wish to get right with his own conscience.

CHAPTER XXXI

DURING Holy Week Justin saw but little of Father Parker, and he missed the long talks he had been having with him nearly every day. He was obliged to acknowledge that he had on the whole enjoyed those interviews, the more so because no second allusion had been made to that case he had

offered for the priest's criticism. They had discussed only impersonal things — literature, poetry, politics, and art. And sometimes, not very often, and with always a certain diffidence and hesitation, Father Parker had spoken of the things that concerned his Faith, and had even given Justin glimpses of his long work in the mission-field.

It was the evening of Good Friday, and Justin had gone for a walk toward Aspoli, when he suddenly became aware of a procession advancing toward him. The dark blue dusk of the south had begun to fall, there was a touch of coldness in the wind that blew in from the darkening sea, and through the crepuscular gloom he could see the glimmer of flaming torches making spots and pyramids of light that had a certain golden quality. As they came nearer he saw it was one of those Good Friday processions of the Dead Christ that may still be seen sometimes in Italy, especially in the south. There were men habited and hooded, with black masks drawn over their faces, carrying in their hands the terrible implements of the Passion — the nails, the spear, the hammer, and the scourge. There was a sound of solemn chanting that in that evening hour seemed to convey an eerie and mysterious warning. Justin stood aside at a turn of the road to let them pass, and he watched them with head instinctively bowed and uncovered. Then with something of the shock of a surprise he saw that lying upon a bier between the two rows of priests marching with slow footsteps, was a statue representing the Figure of Our Blessed Lord, terribly realistic and with the blood flowing as it were from the Five Wounds. Being borne to the tomb in the dusky violet twilight it looked curiously like a dead figure — so much so that Justin was startled when he first perceived it. Immediately be-

hind it was carried a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows such as he had often seen in the wayside shrines around Aspoli. She had gone to fetch the body of her Crucified Son and was accompanying Him to the tomb.

There were women as well as men following the procession as it passed along the hushed and deserted streets and lanes — women garbed in black with the sad and intent faces of mourners. But it was the sight of that stark, gleaming, suffering Figure lying upon the bier in an attitude that realistically suggested the agony of the Passion, that riveted Justin's attention and sent through his frame a sudden shiver of horror. The solemn words of that chanted psalm fell upon his ear and he caught such phrases as these: "*Non avertas faciem tuam a me,*" and again like a clarion cry: "*Notam fac mihi viam in qua ambulem . . .*"

"*Make me to know the way I should walk!*" . . . What petition was this? Justin drew back into the shadows. He had always felt that such things must offend by reason of their bad taste, but now he was struck by the sincerity of those mourners. The Passion was not to them a mere historical event. All day long their thoughts had been given to the contemplation of it in all its phases; now they were enacting with simple faith that scene when the Crucified God was borne to His tomb by His sorrowing mother and the faithful disciples. To-day He was to be found no more in any of the churches. The doors of the tabernacles stood open to reveal their emptiness; there were no lamps burning before those deserted altars. . . .

Justin knew that nothing had ever brought home to him so forcibly or with such terrible and compelling effect the reality of the Passion as this little scene he had just witnessed. He had, too, a vague

superstitious feeling that he had been drawn hither at precisely this moment on purpose that he might be an unwilling and reluctant witness of it all. It was horrible, of course, and sensational, he told himself, but it was undoubtedly impressive on such a night and in such a place.

Now the procession was almost lost to sight in the gloom, but its winding course was still indicated by the yellow flare of the torches held aloft. But even after it had passed completely out of sight and he could hear only the faintest murmur of the chanting, his eyes seemed to retain the vision of that stark, recumbent, death-like Figure of the Dead Christ, and of the terrible instruments — the scourge, the great thick nails, the hammer, the spear. . . . Had there been anything wanting to ultimate humiliation in that Cup? . . .

Justin shuddered and hurried home, taking the lower road from sheer dread of the possibility of meeting the procession again. In the garden of the Villa Annunziata the great trees of camellias showed their starry red and white blooms just beside the front door. A group of almond trees stood up pale with blossom that looked almost silver in the dusk. There was a faint scent of orange blossom, and as he passed the orchard he could see the great ripening globes of fruit. He went down to the terrace overlooking the sea and stood there, letting the cool wind blow against his brow. In the far distance he could see the clustered lights of Naples gleaming through the gloom of the night. He was thinking of Averil, and to-night she did not seem so far away. . . .

To-morrow he would go and see Father Parker and tell him about the procession and the startling impression it had made upon him. It would interest

him, and would also provide them with a topic of conversation. He had told Justin that he would receive him on the Saturday if he cared to come.

Justin found the priest much less well on the following day. He had had a bad night with a good deal of pain, he finally acknowledged.

"But that's much better now," he added; "tell me what you have been doing."

Justin described the procession.

"I saw one long ago in Tuscany," said Father Parker; "they are more rare now in Italy than they used to be."

"It was rather dreadful to one's northern mind," said Justin; "but one couldn't help being impressed by it."

"Mr. Mellor," said the priest suddenly, "will you forgive the impertinence of a dying man? May I say that I wish you would at least examine openly and without prejudice the Catholic claim?"

Justin colored and at first he was inclined to be angry.

"I could never be a Catholic," he said. "And I think your Church makes one great mistake — especially where men are concerned. She imposes obligations and duties that are too harsh — too restricting for grown men. Why should it not be enough to exact one passionate and sincere act of contrition made in secret, without demanding of people that they should also go to confession and expose their frailty — their failure — to a fellow-man? Surely it would be more merciful — more humane?"

"It is not likely that the Church could ever abrogate any part of the duties and rights imposed upon here by her Divine Founder, least of all that right to forgive sins or to retain them," said Father Parker.

"Don't you think the confessional has kept many good men out of the Church who might have made excellent Catholics?"

The priest shook his head.

"If it has kept any individuals from the Church the fault lies in their own pride. They have lacked the essential qualities of submission and obedience to the Divine Will."

Nevertheless when Justin went home to the Villa that evening he carried with him some little books on Catholic doctrine which Father Parker had urged him to accept.

"It's my own fault. I've brought it on myself by talking to him, and by taking an interest in what he said," thought Justin. All through their intercourse he had assured himself that he was by so listening only intending to humor the whim of a sick man. He had liked him and wished to please him, and had perhaps simulated an interest that was greater than he really felt.

And quite evidently Father Parker was an incorrigible "fisher of men." He was not likely to lay aside his nets till death imposed inactivity upon him. But even to Justin his tenacity was puzzling. He was obliged at least to exonerate the man from any charge of being self-seeking since he was clearly very near the end of his earthly task, and would not live to reap any temporal benefit from it. Whatever motive he had must be a good one — a spiritual one. . . .

For the first time in his life Justin had allowed himself to envisage the existence of spiritual things and to come into intimate contact with them. He did not stop to ask himself whither it was all going to lead. But once or twice he thought that if he had been a Catholic and had chosen Father Parker

for a spiritual director, such as it was not unusual for devout Catholics to have, he would have obeyed him almost blindly. He had the feeling that this man, not so many years older than himself, had lived for so long in the close and mystical contemplation of God that he had almost ceased to have any individual life. Life had become with him an act of almost ceaseless worship combined with work done for the sole motive of bringing other souls to God.

When a man has once been compelled to stop and contemplate life from the spiritual side he can never be quite the same again. He is like the proverbial man who has seen a ghost. He may go away and endeavor to forget, and force himself to think only of temporal affairs and worldly concerns, but in the remote background of his thoughts that other side will always be present. Justin was dimly aware of this when on those brilliant spring evenings he sat on the terrace and listened to Father Parker.

After Easter the weather had turned suddenly warm, and there were delicious days of sunshine with soft breezes from the sea. The spring flowers had burst into bloom in all the gardens as well as in the fields and vineyards of Aspoli, a riot of color and fragrance, perfuming the air. That renaissance, always so wonderful in the south, seemed to transform Aspoli into a wilderness of blossom. Roses and wistaria spread their embroidery lavishly over ancient walls. The butterflies emerged from their winter hiding-places. It was strange that in those days of reviving life the sick man should grow appreciably worse.

If he had not been so ill it is possible that Justin would not have paid him almost daily visits. But although he excused his action to himself in this

way he knew quite well that he was beginning to feel an almost passionate interest in Father Parker, in his conversation, even in his Faith. . . .

One evening it was raining when he walked down to the hotel. The sea lay like a great restless shadow and its murmur was louder than usual; the horizon was blurred, and great, wet-looking white clouds had descended and obliterated the mountains that guarded the coast. Justin could hear the rain splashing heavily on the thick grove of palm-trees outside the hotel, with a rhythmic, disturbing sound.

It was one of those evenings when nature seems ill at ease, as if she were aware of some impending calamity. Something of those feelings possessed Justin's heart, making him long for home, for the security of London, its lighted streets and busy traffic, the crowds jostling on the pavements, the brilliant shop-windows, all the familiar aspect which suddenly rose before him like a vision, giving him an acute sensation of nostalgia. He longed, too, for his club, and for the sight of an English drawing-room, cosy, warm, with a great coal fire burning on the hearth, and the little tables with their burden of shining silver appurtenances, set out for tea. It was only one of those periodical fits of homesickness from which all exiles suffer, and from which even those who are exiled by their own choice are by no means exempt. He felt his loneliness keenly, and his mind brooded upon that unhappy sequence of events which had served to emphasize and increase it. For somewhere over there to the northwest, beyond the high mountains and the restless sea, was Averil Waring. . . .

He climbed the stairs, and knocked at Father Parker's door. A small wood fire was burning on the hearth, and the priest's long chair was drawn up near it.

"How are you to-day, Father?"

"I haven't been very brilliant to-day," said the priest quietly. His face had a worn, gray look, as if he had been enduring great suffering. But it was perfectly calm.

"Oh, I am sorry," said Justin a little awkwardly.

"You should be glad — for my sake," said Father Parker. "I have prayed to suffer as much as I can bear with God's help, until the end."

"You are cruel to yourself," said Justin, sitting down by the fire.

"On the contrary," said the priest. "And I believe that God in His loving mercy will hear me and fill my cup to the brim. . . . Believe me, Mr. Mellor, suffering is one of the greatest and most merciful gifts that we can receive from His hands. . . ."

Justin was silent. It was a strange, almost an exaggerated, view to take, but he knew that the priest was perfectly sincere, perfectly in earnest when he said those words.

He said suddenly:

"Father, I want to tell you something in confidence."

"It shall be the same as if you were to tell it to me in the confessional," said Father Parker, who knew quite well what was coming. He had been waiting for that confidence all these weeks, and had sometimes wondered at its long delay.

"When I told you of my friend's dilemma and asked your advice there was something I kept back from you."

Father Parker looked at him with sunken eyes.

"I knew that, Mr. Mellor."

Justin leaned forward.

"You guessed then that I was the man?"

"I felt certain of it. But it was not for me to ask questions — to try to force your confidence."

"I thought it would ease my heart to tell some one. To make a confession that was not a confession."

"I knew that was why you had come to see me," said Father Parker kindly.

He still watched Justin with a wistful attention. Then he added:

"The way you received my advice — the manner in which you immediately rejected it on behalf of your friend — convinced me that you were speaking of yourself."

"And now that you know me better you would still give me the same hard counsel?"

"As a priest — as a Catholic — there is no other solution. My knowledge of you can make no difference."

"I have been so heavily punished in losing Averil," said Justin in a voice that was broken with emotion. He set his face with a strong effort of self-control. "If you could only give me counsel that was not on the face of it impossible."

"Are you sure that it is impossible? Look closely into your own heart, Mr. Mellor."

Justin paused, looking at him. Then:

"*I dare not look*," he said in a stifled tone.

But he rose to his feet and then fell on his knees beside Father Parker's chair.

The priest regarded him with a tender scrutiny.

"*Man shall come to the Deep Heart and God shall be exalted*," he said softly; "in Holy Week we always repeat those words. We must come to the Deep Heart which St. Augustine says is Christ's. We can not leave that out of our lives — we can not remain in that ultimate desolation that comes from wilful separation from God. Perhaps it will be my last work on earth to show you the way — the Way that is also the Truth and the Life!"

He lifted his hand and over the bowed head of Justin Mellor he made the sign of the cross and murmured the words of a Latin blessing.

Justin rose and went out of the room without a word. He could not trust himself to speak. He knew that Father Parker had accomplished that last work of which he had spoken. But to-night he could bear no more. . . .

As he entered the study at the Villa Annunziata he felt himself drawn irresistibly toward the crucifix that was still hanging where Peter had placed it upon the white wall. He went toward it slowly, almost as one hypnotized. Then he dropped on his knees and prayed. . . .

He remembered that once it had seemed to demand something of him — something that he had not been prepared to give. But now — now he would hold nothing back.

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stoke!
My harness piece by piece Thou has hewn
from me,
And smitten me to my knee. . . .

CHAPTER XXXII

A FEW days later Justin wrote to Peter — a short letter but very much to the point. It surprised its recipient, for ever since Justin's engagement last year the two men had ceased to correspond. But Peter felt it would be impossible to refuse the simple request it contained.

"I want you to come and stay with me for a bit. I'm homesick and a few other things, and I can't leave because a friend of mine is lying very ill at the hotel here. I want to see you *very much*."

"Of course you must go, Peter darling," said Monica when she read the letter.

"I don't like leaving you alone and I shall hate staying there," said Peter, "and I've got a heap to do."

But Monica only said:

"He wouldn't write like that if he didn't want you very badly. You're always hard on Justin, you know!"

A week later Peter was standing on the threshold of the Villa Annunziata. It was a warm evening at the very end of April, and the perfume of orange-blossom filled the air with its penetrating fragrance. He looked out upon the old, familiar, beautiful view of sea and sky and mountainous coast, all painted in blue and violet and gold.

Justin had come out to greet him with something of his old friendliness.

"It's most awfully good of you to take pity on my loneliness and come like this, Peter," he said warmly.

He held out his hand and Peter grasped it.

"As a matter of fact, I'm just through with some proofs and Monica had been telling me I ought to take a holiday."

"Your output is so enormous," said Justin, "that I have begun to suspect you of writing books in your sleep. I don't want to flatter you, but I've been going through a course of Peter Clutton lately and I have felt extremely edified in consequence."

Peter was not sure if he intended to be satirical or not, so he contented himself by observing: "You've survived it, though, which is the main point. But I'm sure you've been most horribly bored!"

"Come and have some tea now," said Justin, leading the way into his study. The first object which

caught Peter's eye was the crucifix which had once belonged to Mrs. Waring hanging still where he himself had placed it above the writing-bureau. A little lamp now burned before it.

In his rapid scrutiny of the room this fact seemed to Peter to stand out with extraordinary significance.

Justin poured out the tea and talked lightly of passing local events, of trivial happenings in Aspoli, of Miss Wilkinson and her dogs, and of Mrs. Minchin and her ailments.

"And your friend who was too ill to be left, how is he?" said Peter.

"He can never be any better," said Justin briefly, almost as if he were unwilling to discuss the subject; "some day I'll take you to see him."

Now that Peter was there it was extraordinarily difficult to talk to him. There was still very formidable barriers between them, and Justin, knowing they would have to be removed sooner or later, felt singularly unequal to the task. Peter had been such a miserable, helpless puppet in his hands!

When tea was over they lit their cigarettes and strolled out into the garden. It was a beautiful spring evening and sky and sea were palely colored, not quite golden, not quite silver. The outlines of the coast were painted in a deep gray tone, soft as velvet and reminiscent of a Japanese print. The two big umbrella pines were darkly outlined against the pale background of sea and sky; they looked like two sentinels, eternally vigilant.

There had been silence while the two men stood side by side looking at the view and listening to the washing of the waves against the cliffs. But presently Justin broke it by saying:

"Do you remember saying once it must make a difference to a house to have been occupied for many

years by good and devout people? Do you think it might make such a difference that by living in it one might in time come to absorb something of its atmosphere — even if it were very alien to one's own thoughts — one's own beliefs?"

Peter said, wondering:

"I have never thought about it. But I don't see why it should not be possible, especially if one were very sensitive to atmosphere and ready to lend one's self to impressions."

He had not the key to this mysterious speech, and he wondered if Justin intended to give it to him. He waited with a certain suppressed eagerness to hear more.

"Since I have been living here without any hope of ever seeing Averil again I have been learning about the things that divided us," said Justin at last.

Peter was startled into silence. It seemed strange and unreal that he should be standing on the terrace in the garden of the Villa Annunziata, listening to Justin while he spoke of Averil in that tone of detached melancholy.

"Do you mean the things of religion?" he said abruptly.

He was convinced now that Justin had something important to tell him and the delay was getting on his nerves. He had never wished nor intended to speak of Averil Waring, yet he felt sure that this thing which Justin had to say must concern her and possibly himself. How could any concern of Averil's ever touch him — Peter — again?

Suddenly he became conscious that Justin was speaking:

"Of course you heard that our engagement was broken off?"

"No — I never heard it. But I supposed something of the kind must have happened, because she

went away to live in England. I saw her once — for a moment — with Lady Ann Cheverton at Sandhythe."

"She broke it off very soon after the princess' death. She went to England with one of the nurses. Since then I have heard nothing, except that in one of her letters Monica said she was working in a settlement in the East End."

"Yes. She is there with Lady Ann." Peter's voice was hoarse and strained.

He waited with an anxious eagerness he could not repress.

"I am going to be a Catholic, Peter," said Justin. "My friend — the one I told you of who is ill here — is a missionary priest, Father Parker. I hope he will receive me soon. . . . But I didn't ask you to come here to tell you that. The fact is I have a confession to make to you. I used to hope there would never be any need to make it, but now — it has got to be done."

A confession to make? Peter's face was a little hard. He began to hope that Justin was not going to tell him anything that he would find impossible to forgive. He looked at him anxiously and saw that his face was white, there was almost a look of fear in his eyes.

"I want to tell you that I deliberately separated you from Averil Waring last summer when you were here. I was afraid that you were falling in love with her — that you were going to ask her to marry you. That was why I made you come off with me to Amalfi — resolving you should not come back here. It's my belief that she cared for you all the time. I repeated a remark you had made to me in London when I first told you I was going to buy this place. You said the claims of poetic justice would be satisfied if I were to fall in love with Miss War-

ing and marry her. I never said where nor when you had made it. But the princess repeated it to her and naturally it made her believe that you wished for our marriage."

He spoke in an even almost mechanical way, conscious that his courage was slowly ebbing before the fierce anger and scorn of Peter's dark eyes. There was contempt, too, in the cynical curve of his mouth. Justin felt suddenly small and abased; his body tingled with shame.

But he went on quietly:

"She was accustomed to see these things arranged as they are abroad. She accepted me, I believe, because the princess wished for our marriage — she wanted to keep her near her. But after her death everything was changed, and I suppose Miss Waring saw no reason why she should go on with a marriage that was" — he hesitated — "that was plainly distasteful to her. She never cared for me at all — I knew that from the first day."

The blow he had dealt at his own heart in saying these words made him wince with pain.

"What are you going to do, Clutton?"

"Do? What can I do?" said Peter.

"I mean — didn't you want to marry her? You were in love with her, weren't you? I wasn't mistaken, surely?"

Peter set his mouth in a hard thin line.

"Such a marriage might have been possible then. It's forever impossible now! Your confession has come a little late, my dear Justin!"

"Why impossible?"

"No doubt you heard that the princess left her a large fortune. She is a very rich woman."

"What difference can that make?"

"All the difference in the world."

"But if she cares? Oh, Peter — it may not have

been you, but there was something — some one — between us always. . . . I knew that I had not and could never have her love. . . .”

“I never had the slightest reason to suppose that she cared for me,” said Peter. “But you are right about one thing. I did intend to ask her to marry me last summer. I had almost uttered the words the last evening I spent here. But you came — you and the princess — to the fountain, just at that moment. I never had another opportunity. You made it absolutely necessary for me to go away. What — what has made you tell me now when it is too late for anything except silence?”

He looked down at him with a fierce scrutiny, as if he suspected some fresh mean motive.

“You don’t suppose I told you for my own pleasure?” said Justin with a mirthless laugh. “I’m not yet accustomed to saying *Mea culpa* once a week as you are, Peter. But I wronged you and I am sorry. It hurt my conscience and I spoke to Father Parker about it. I was reading ‘Until the Harvest’ and I suppose I was in rather a miserable, morbid state about all that had happened at the time. It first put the idea of — of absolution into my head, and when I got to know Father Parker I told him about it — not as about myself, but as a kind of test-case that had happened to some one else. And he said ——”

Peter stood very still, his arms folded, his face averted. He felt almost as if he ought not to listen. . . .

“He said he could only tell me what he should say and do if a Catholic came to him as a penitent making that confession ——”

“And that was ——?”

“To repair the wrong that had been done — as an act of reparation. If he had the firm intention of

doing this as soon as possible he could receive absolution. Peter — don't you understand? I wanted absolution. It was a little thing, perhaps, but it had touched my honor. The wet spring days were rather dreary here, and I spent a good deal of time quite alone, and I was awfully cut up by all that I had gone through. The result was that I began to wish for sacramental absolution. I knew nothing — I had everything to learn. . . .”

Beneath a stain of dishonor the soul, restless and uneasy and with a voice that would not be gainsaid, had cried out to have it removed. And as Justin had said — it had not been easy. It involved a degree of self-betrayal and self-abasement that only a strong soul could face at all.

“Will you tell me one thing in return?” said Justin. “You have not changed? I mean — toward her — toward Averil?”

“I have not changed,” said Peter slowly. “Where she is concerned I can never change.” Then a kindlier impulse supervened; generosity called for generosity; he held out his hand. “Justin, don't say any more. You've told me too much already. It's simply *great* of you to have said it at all. Don't — don't let's speak of it again.”

But Justin could not have spoken then if his life had depended upon it. He held Peter's hand for a second, and then slipped away through the gloom of the ilex-grove and disappeared from sight.

Peter stood alone by the sea that had become now like a gray and restless shadow. Here and there the light of a fishing-vessel or felucca showed across that wide expanse of water. Far in the distance he could see the lights of Naples climbing from the level of the sea up to the fortress of St. Elmo. But he was thinking only of Justin. His friend, changed beyond belief, had been given back to him after

months of bitter misunderstanding. But his new knowledge had not brought — alas, how could it now? — Averil any nearer to himself. The question that occurred to him then with a strange sinking of the heart was whether it would indeed bring Justin and Averil together again.

For — Peter was aware of this and bravely faced and acknowledged it — the new Justin was worthy of her. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIII

DURING the weeks that followed the two friends resumed the old intimate intercourse that had in days gone by brought pleasure to them both. It was far more intimate friendship now than it had been even in the old Oxford days, for there was a new sympathy between the two men. It was at Peter's suggestion that Father Parker was brought to the Villa Annunziata, and two nuns belonging to a nursing Order came thither to tend him. He was growing very rapidly worse, and it was a consolation to him to feel that he was leaving his catechumen in capable hands.

He lingered on into June and almost his last action was to receive Justin Mellor into the Catholic Church. Peter Clutton acted as sponsor. Father Parker never left his bed after that day, and his death took place less than a week later.

For these reasons and also because he was enjoying the lovely days of early summer at Aspoli, Peter remained on. The accounts of Monica were good and she urged him to prolong his holiday, and not to dream of shortening it on her account. Justin was also very pressing in his entreaties that Peter should remain with him; he seemed to dread being left alone.

They had gone for a walk one evening and were returning home by the lower road when a well-known voice fell upon their ears.

"Lupo! Lupo! Come along at once and leave that disgusting old bone!" The ominous cracking of a whip followed, and Lupo darted around the corner triumphantly carrying the bone in his mouth. He was followed almost immediately by Miss Wilkinson, who almost fell against Peter in her efforts to reach her rebellious favorite.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Mellor! I was trying to take that bone away from Lupo. I am so afraid of his being poisoned."

"Oh, let him have it. I don't suppose it will hurt him," said Justin good-naturedly. "By the way, I don't think you know my friend, Mr. Clutton. Peter, let me introduce you to Miss Wilkinson."

"Oh, but I have heard a great deal about you, Mr. Clutton," said Miss Wilkinson, forgetting for the moment to pursue Lupo, who had retired to a safe distance to enjoy his bone. "I knew you were here last summer and I was dreadfully distressed not to meet you then. I wanted you to write your name in my autograph book. It is quite a long time since any celebrity has added his name, but in the olden days a great many of dear papa's friends used to spoil me by writing in it. I have quite a number of the great Victorians — Swinburne and Watts and George Meredith! Oh, I assure you you will find yourself in very good company. But, Mr. Mellor, that reminds me — have you heard the wonderful news?"

"I have heard no news at all," said Justin.

"I didn't tell Lupo till this morning, though I heard it late last night. I was afraid he would be too excited to sleep — you know how nervous and

highly strung the poor darling is, and he is always so much worse after a sleepless night. Dogs are so extraordinarily human, are they not, Mr. Clutton?"

She smiled quite archly at Peter.

"You are really keeping us on tenter-hooks to hear this wonderful news," said Justin. "I only hope it will not keep either of us awake all night."

"I heard it from Assunta — she was nearly off her head with delight and she spoke so loud that I was dreadfully afraid Lupo might overhear — I had only just tucked him up in his little basket and he was not asleep. Servants are so tactless: they never think a dog can understand what they are saying, and I know Assunta does not care at all for Lupo."

"Well, what did Assunta say?" inquired Justin patiently. He was really only humoring her, for he did not in the least suspect that the news could hold any special interest for himself or Peter.

"Miss Waring is coming to the Villa Magnolia almost at once," proclaimed Miss Wilkinson. "I am surprised that you have not heard about it, for I believe they have been getting the place ready for some days past. She is expected — let me see, when was it Assunta said — to-morrow — yes, I am nearly sure she said to-morrow. Dear Averil felt the cold very much last winter, and she was overtired and worked too hard in the East End. I always said it was mad of her to go there, but I suppose she was flattered that the princess' English relations should take her up in the way they did. They say Lord Westingham's son, Lord Mendlesham, even wanted to marry her, and his father would have given his consent, although he didn't like the religion, because he thought Averil so charming. But Mrs. Minchin heard that she refused him. I don't quite believe it myself, for of course it was a very

great chance for dear Averil. Ah, you must forgive me, Mr. Mellor — I am letting my tongue run away with me! I always want to say all I know when I talk about the dear Warings — they were such old, intimate friends of mine. And although Averil is such a rich, important person now I am sure that I shall not find her in the least changed toward me, for I am really the oldest friend she has in the world! But they tell me she is not going to stay very long — she has come to take over possession because she is now of age, and she has not been very well and the doctor thought a complete change would do her good. I do not know at all what her plans are after that, but I do hope she will not think it necessary to run away directly. Aspoli does not seem the same place without her, and even Mrs. Minchin has said once or twice that she missed her."

"That is certainly very wonderful news, Miss Wilkinson," said Justin, who had not dared to look at Peter once during all this long and rambling speech. "And now I'm afraid we must be moving on. We've had a long walk and it's already half past tea-time."

"Oh, I always have my tea very early on account of the dogs," said Miss Wilkinson, "they like to have it just after their afternoon nap, and before we start out for a walk. I'm sure Miss Waring will be astonished to find you both here," she added with a shrill laugh, "it will be quite like old times only that the princess is no longer with us. Well, Averil is certainly a very fortunate girl to have that fine villa and all that money. Come along, Lupo — didn't you hear Mr. Mellor say he was in a hurry to get home?"

She was well out of sight before either of the two men ventured to speak. Peter broke the silence first.

"I think I ought to be pushing off to-morrow, Justin," he said.

"Oh, surely that isn't necessary? If she is to be there for only a few days you need not see her unless you wish to."

"I suppose she was obliged to come. But I wish it hadn't been just now."

To-morrow — yes, she would be here to-morrow, and the knowledge filled him with a strange emotion both of joy and pain.

"I shall make a point of seeing her," said Justin presently; "if she can come to Aspoli I don't think she can feel any awkwardness about meeting me. And after all I suppose we are destined to be neighbors — she and I."

But when the time came to carry out this project he walked down to the Villa Magnolia without telling Peter of his intention. Peter had been curiously restless and unsettled ever since he had heard of Averil's coming and once or twice Justin feared he might have some difficulty in restraining him from an abrupt and premature departure, an event which would defeat all the plans he was privately forming.

When he arrived at the villa two days later old Assunta opened the door to him and greeted him with the profuse and eager welcome that comes so simply and so naturally to the Italian servant. He was shown into the little white *salotto*, which the princess had always used. It had a very deserted, uninhabited look, in fact, there was an indescribable air of desolation about the whole place. He felt that Averil would never be able to make her home there.

She did not keep him waiting long. In a few minutes after Assunta's departure the door opened and she came into the room. The day was warm,

and she was wearing a white dress cut low at the throat. She held out her hand and greeted him without any embarrassment. It seemed an eternity since their last meeting.

"I hope you had a good journey?" he said in a pleasant, friendly tone.

It was impossible that they should not continue to be on friendly neighborly terms when their respective houses were so close together. And with all his heart he wanted to be friends with Averil now.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "It is very kind of you to come to see me. I haven't seen any one yet since I arrived."

She was not changed; she was if possible more disturbingly beautiful than ever.

"I heard you weren't coming back to live here."

She said:

"No — I should be lost in this great house. I shall probably let it for the present and go back to England."

He waited a moment. Then he said:

"Averil — I may still say Averil, mayn't I? — I have something to tell you."

A startled look came into her eyes. She had made so sure that he would not allude in any way to the past.

"Peter Clutton is with me at the Villa Annunziata."

She turned red and then pale; he saw that she was clasping her hands nervously in her lap.

"With you? At the Villa Annunziata?" she said.

"He has been with me since April. It is a long story — I can't tell you all about it now. Some day perhaps. . . . But I want to know if I may bring him to see you?"

She was white to the lips but she answered steadily:

"I shall be very glad to see him again. Is he to be with you much longer?"

"I don't know — he's been trying to rush away, but I wouldn't let him."

She was silent, holding herself in that familiar motionless pose; he was conscious that her self-control was due to a violent interior effort.

"Averil," he said, "I have come to tell you that Peter cares for you. That much he has told me. He has always cared for you since he was here last summer. But he will not tell you. He has absurd ideas and scruples — based upon your wealth. I know that I never had your love. But sometimes I thought it was not yours to give me — because you had already given it to him."

She did not speak, but remained in that same motionless attitude, gazing straight in front of her almost as if she had not heard him.

He waited a moment. Then —

"May I still tell him that he may come? With this knowledge do you still wish to see him?"

She made a very slight affirmative movement of her head. The gesture was so slight as to be almost imperceptible. It seemed to her that the whole world was rocking and swaying about her in a vortex of blinding light. In the silence that followed she could almost hear the beating of her own heart. It was true then. He loved her, and he had always loved her.

Justin's face was ghastly pale. While the ordeal had lasted he had not been conscious of pain; he had felt as he thought a man must feel who is bent upon fulfilling a task on which his very life depends. But when she bowed her head with that little royal gesture he almost broke down.

He did not even make a conventional farewell, but went out of the room with the cruel consciousness that she was not even aware of the abrupt manner of his departure. As he entered the gate of the Villa Annunziata he could see Peter's tall form pacing the terrace that overlooked the sea. He went quickly toward him.

For a moment there was silence. He wondered if Peter had guessed that he had gone down to the Villa Magnolia this afternoon to see Averil. He began nervously:

"I have seen Averil."

"Was she very much surprised?"

"To see me? No, I don't think so — she took it as a matter of course, I think."

"I did not mean that — I meant — to hear that you had become a Catholic."

"I didn't even mention it. We were — we were talking about you, Peter."

"About me? Why on earth did you tell her that I was here?"

Peter spoke almost angrily; his face had flushed a dull red. Oh, he had no intention of seeing her again, to permit the sight of her to fill his heart with that old savage unrest.

"I thought she ought to know. Peter — you must forgive me if I have done wrong. But I told her that you loved her." His face was pale and a little wintry smile flickered about his lips. "And then I asked her if with this knowledge she still wished to see you." He paused. "Won't you go to her, Peter? I think she is waiting for you."

Peter looked at him in a strange surprise.

"What made you do this, Justin?" he asked in a harsh deep tone.

Justin only answered:

"I can't say whether it was for your sake or for hers. . . ."

It was evening when Peter went down to the Villa Magnolia, and a little cool wind had set in from the sea, refreshing the atmosphere, which had been unusually hot for the time of year. It was now nearly a year since he had last made that once familiar journey. Assunta met him and told him that the Signorina was in the garden, indicating with her forefinger the probable spot where he would be likely to find her. She even suggested accompanying him in the search, but Peter was able to dissuade her from this course.

Justin had left him no choice but to seek this interview. And if he had been mistaken about it and about Averil's wish to see him, it was after all only he himself who would be hurt. .

For even now he would not let himself believe all that Justin's words had conveyed; even now he would not let himself hope. But he must see her this once more, and then if it were her wish they need never meet again.

He came upon her where he had always felt certain that she would be sitting, by the fountain in the ilex-grove. He caught a glimpse of her dress, bright where the sun touched it, even before he saw her face. She was sitting on the marble seat with the little table in front of her, and her hand was resting upon it. Her face was turned seaward and away from him. It was only as he drew nearer that she seemed to become aware of his approaching footsteps and rose.

They stood and looked at each other in the frail gold of the evening sunlight that seemed to turn all her uncovered hair to brightness.

"Averil —" he said. He put his hand on hers and felt that it trembled like an imprisoned bird.

She had not spoken and he found himself wishing that she would speak. He wanted to hear her voice.

But as he uttered her name it seemed to her that those months of silence and separation had been swiftly blotted out.

"Justin has told you that I love you?" he said, looking down at her.

"Yes," she answered. The word came faintly.

"Averil — has he made a mistake? I know that he must have — but I think I would rather hear it from you. He said that in spite of this knowledge you still wished to see me. It is not possible that you can care. Once, it is true, I was fool enough to think it possible, but there have been many things since then to show me I was wrong. If Justin has made a mistake it would be kinder of you to tell me to go away now. . . ."

There was a deep new emotion in his voice; his dark eyes were fixed upon her face with a tenderness she had never imagined.

"He did not make a mistake. I wanted you to come," she said. She waited a moment. "It's been a long time," she said quietly, "but I hoped — I felt — that some day you would come."

"Ah, if I had known —" he said. The things that had kept them apart for so long seemed to him trivial and absurd now, yet once they had been in his eyes formidable and insuperable barriers, hiding her from him. He put out his arms and drew her close to him.

"I have loved you all the time," he said. "I had meant to tell you so before I went away last year — I meant to ask you to wait for me. But things happened and I was prevented. But here — yes,

it was here in this very place — that I tried to tell you. Only they came and interrupted us. I tried to tell you again in the book I sent you, but I suppose you didn't understand. Oh, Averil — I want to hear you say it now — I want to be quite sure that you love me."

"I have always loved you," she answered gravely, "always, even from those first days. But they told me it was a girl's foolish dream."

She raised her face to his and he stooped and kissed her.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"IT is always the unexpected that happens, as I frequently tell my darling Lupo, though sometimes he has good reason not to believe me!" said Miss Wilkinson, as she ran in to discuss the latest happenings with her dear friend, Mrs. Minchin. "Averil is engaged to Mr. Clutton, and I think it is extremely generous of Mr. Mellor to be so nice about it when she behaved so very badly to him and quite recently, too. A girl who deliberately jilts a man as Averil jilted him ought not to find things go so smoothly with her afterward. But I can't help thinking that it really began last year, and that she was in love with Mr. Clutton all the time. He is making a great deal of money, they say, so I suppose he is not marrying her solely on account of her fortune."

"It will be an extremely awkward situation for every one concerned," said Mrs. Minchin, who was feeling the heat and was also living in momentary dread lest Lupo should spring upon her clean white muslin dress and destroy its pristine freshness.

"They will have to live cheek by jowl in the future whether they like it or not."

"Oh, they will get used to it in time!" cried Miss Wilkinson, "and in a few years I daresay they will have forgotten all about it. I am sure they have agreed to let bygones be bygones. It isn't as if Averil had ever really cared about him, for I know that she always disliked the color of his hair. But I have my own ideas about the future, Mrs. Minchin, and though you are sure to laugh at me and call me sentimental I am going to tell you what they are. I have already told Lupo and he *quite* agreed with me, for he barked twice — that is his dear way of saying *yes*, you know!"

Mrs. Minchin laughed in spite of herself.

"Well, Maud, let me hear these wonderful projects. But I warn you that if Lupo jumps up on this dress I shall hurt him very much."

"Well, you know the wedding is to take place here in about two months' time. Mr. Clutton is going back to England almost at once, and I think Mr. Mellor is going with him. Averil has asked her friend Lady Ann Cheverton — the princess' niece, you know — to come out and stay with her as soon as she can, and she will be here until after the wedding. You will see — we shall be put quite on one side for these fine new friends of Averil's, but we can't help that, and I for one shall never show that I am at all hurt by it. She knows quite well that I was her mother's oldest friend in Aspoli, and that I could have chaperoned her quite as well as this Lady Ann, who is only a new acquaintance. But that isn't what I was going to say. When Mr. Clutton returns I suppose Mr. Mellor will come with him and then he will see Lady Ann, and I have made up my mind that he is to fall in love with her. That would be quite perfect — these four friends all liv-

ing near together and all believing the same thing! That is a great bond of union, and I am sure it must be delightful, for I have never yet been able to discover anybody who believes quite the same things that I do!"

"My dear Maud, I wonder you don't take to writing novels — you are always planning romances about people you know. Before Mr. Mellor came you had quite decided that he was to marry Averil, and now you have already begun to look about for another wife for him."

"You wait and see," said Miss Wilkinson with undiminished conviction. "And even if nothing comes of it, you can not think what an interest it lends to a dull life like mine to weave these romances, as you call them, about other people. I have always liked Mr. Mellor, and he has been very civil and agreeable to me ever since he came to live here. I want him to have a nice wife to make up to him for the very bad and unkind treatment he received from Averil Waring."

"She was very young, perhaps she didn't know her own mind," said Mrs. Minchin, who almost always took the opposite view to Miss Wilkinson's from a sheer spirit of contradiction. "Anyhow, she's happy enough now — you've only got to look at her to see that. Why — there they are — coming down the road together."

Miss Wilkinson crossed the room and standing by Mrs. Minchin's side looked curiously out of the window.

Peter and Averil were walking side by side. They were talking and laughing and looking into each other's faces after the manner of happy lovers. They were quite unconscious that they were being observed.

"I am sure they are very much in love,"

whispered Miss Wilkinson. "She is quite changed. . . . And beautiful — you can not deny that she is more beautiful than ever."

"I don't deny it. And I think Peter Clutton is a very fortunate young man," said Mrs. Minchin, as the two figures passed out of sight.

THE END

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REFERENCE

This book

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the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are aged 65 and over has increased by 1.5 million, and the number of people aged 75 and over has increased by 1 million (Office for National Statistics 1999). The number of people aged 65 and over is projected to increase to 6.5 million by 2011, and the number of people aged 75 and over to 3.5 million (Office for National Statistics 1999).

There is a growing awareness of the need to address the needs of older people in the community. The Department of Health (1999) has published a strategy for older people, which sets out a vision for a society in which older people are able to live independently and actively, and to participate in the life of the community. The strategy also sets out a number of key objectives, including: to improve the health and well-being of older people; to support older people to live independently; to promote social inclusion for older people; and to ensure that older people are able to participate in the life of the community.

One of the key objectives of the strategy is to improve the health and well-being of older people. This is achieved through a number of measures, including: promoting healthy living; preventing illness and disability; and providing support for older people with health problems. The strategy also sets out a number of key objectives for the health and well-being of older people, including: to reduce the incidence of chronic disease; to improve the quality of life of older people; and to ensure that older people are able to live independently.

Another key objective of the strategy is to support older people to live independently. This is achieved through a number of measures, including: providing support for older people with physical and mental health problems; providing support for older people with social and financial problems; and providing support for older people with housing problems. The strategy also sets out a number of key objectives for supporting older people to live independently, including: to reduce the number of older people living in care homes; to increase the number of older people living in their own homes; and to ensure that older people are able to live independently.

A third key objective of the strategy is to promote social inclusion for older people. This is achieved through a number of measures, including: promoting social participation; promoting social networks; and promoting social inclusion. The strategy also sets out a number of key objectives for promoting social inclusion for older people, including: to increase the number of older people participating in social activities; to increase the number of older people in social networks; and to ensure that older people are able to participate in the life of the community.

Finally, a fourth key objective of the strategy is to ensure that older people are able to participate in the life of the community. This is achieved through a number of measures, including: promoting civic participation; promoting community participation; and promoting participation in the life of the community. The strategy also sets out a number of key objectives for ensuring that older people are able to participate in the life of the community, including: to increase the number of older people participating in civic activities; to increase the number of older people participating in community activities; and to ensure that older people are able to participate in the life of the community.

The strategy for older people is a comprehensive document that sets out a vision for a society in which older people are able to live independently and actively, and to participate in the life of the community. The strategy also sets out a number of key objectives, including: to improve the health and well-being of older people; to support older people to live independently; to promote social inclusion for older people; and to ensure that older people are able to participate in the life of the community.